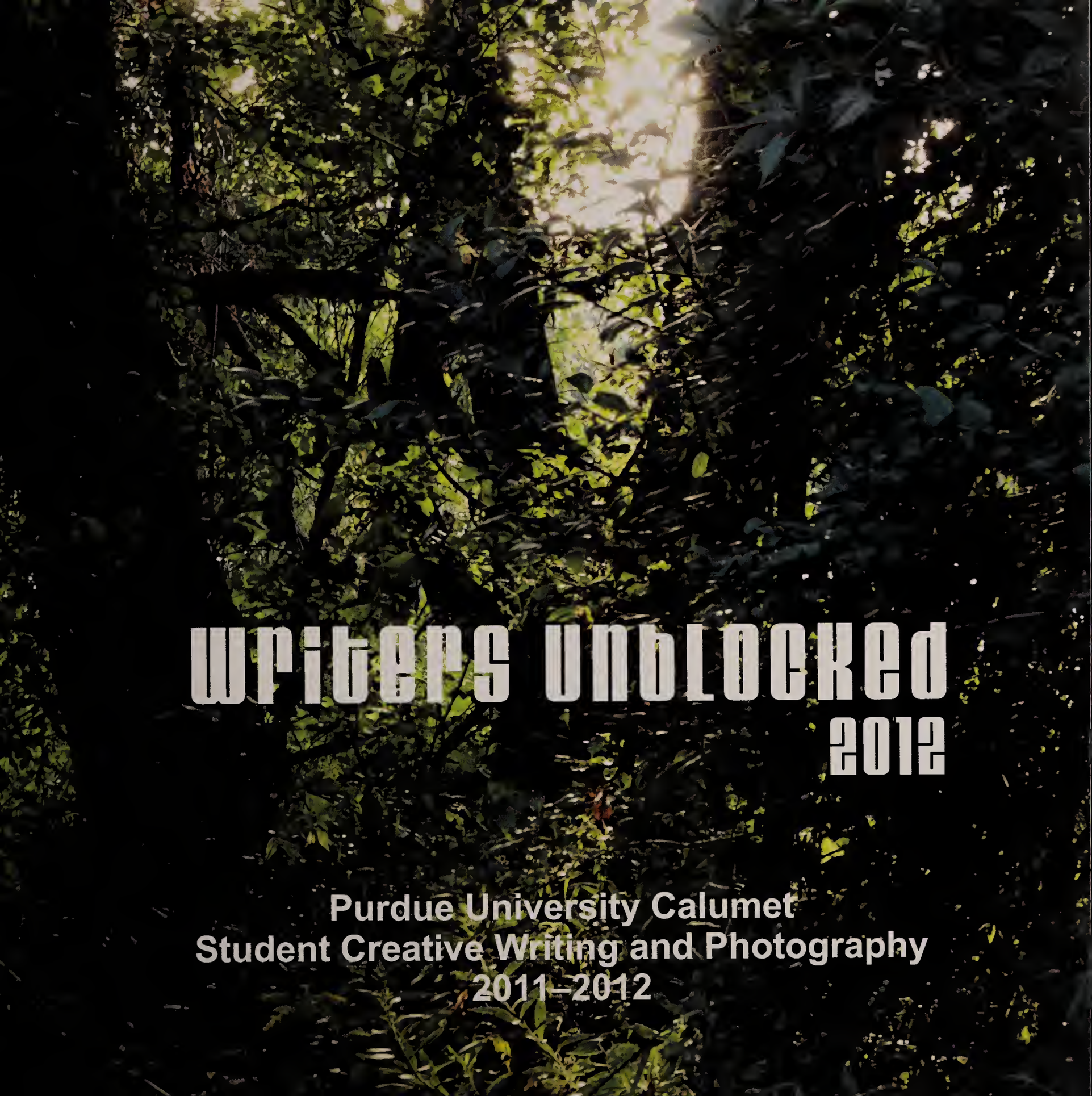

Writers Unblocked 2012

Purdue University Calumet
Student Creative Writing and Photography
2011–2012

Writers Unblocked

The best student creative writing and photography

2011-2012

Purdue University Calumet
Department of English and Philosophy
Department of Communication and Creative Arts

This the sixth edition of poetry, fiction and non-fiction from creative writing students at Purdue University Calumet. All work in this volume was written by students enrolled in creative writing classes in fall 2011 and spring 2012. We are pleased again this year to feature photography from students in Professor Tom Roach's Location Photography class. We are proud of the creative accomplishments of our students, and grateful to the School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, and to the Departments of English and Philosophy and Communication and Creative Arts for supporting this journal. Thanks especially to Dan Dunn, former Dean of LASS, for establishing *Writers Unblocked* as a School priority, and to the current Dean of LASS, Ron Corthell, for continuing that support.

Michael Dobberstein
Janine Harrison
Connie Wachala
Creative Writing Instructors

Front/Back cover photo: Michael Roach
Book design by Megan Varney

PHOTO: LAURA EARLY

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Shadow

Rachel Cox

Nicole Herbertson was a shadow. That was what she noticed about herself after a while. She wasn't invisible, as a lot of other fifteen year-olds felt. Shadows aren't invisible. But nobody pays attention to shadows that much. There wasn't a whole lot to pay attention to when it came to Nicole. She wasn't the smartest or the prettiest girl around. She wasn't exceptionally talented at anything. She wasn't incredibly funny or interesting to talk to. She was just a shadow.

"Welcome to Auburn Hills," the green sign said in flowery letters. Nicole walked past this sign every day on the way home. She always thought that the sign looked too fancy, but then again-- Auburn Hills was a nice neighborhood, the kind of neighborhood that kids targeted on Halloween because they knew the best candy came from there. Her parents were rich -- you had to be in order to live here. Whether at a business meeting halfway across the country or simply working, they were never home. Nicole learned early on how to be alone. She had no siblings and spent most of her time reading comic books or playing video games.

Today was the last day of the school year for Nicole. The only thought on her mind was that for a full summer, she wouldn't have to set foot in Beadlesway. Beadlesway School for Girls was filled with young women who were well aware of the fact that their parents could afford to send them there. Every two weeks, they had Casual Friday where they were permitted to wear something other than their school uniform. Casual Fridays were far from casual-- they were more like a competition to see who could wear the most expensive, fashionable brands. Nicole was just glad that it gave her an opportunity to wear jeans.

None of the girls at Beadlesway talked to Nicole. It was not for lack of trying-- Nicole was far from asocial, and had had a modest group of friends back when she went to a normal middle school. But now, whenever she would try to strike up a conversation with the girls, she had nothing to talk to them about. She had tried to find common ground, but it hadn't worked very well. The school was small, and gossip travelled quickly. She was soon branded as The Weird Girl. No one wanted to talk to her after that. There were a few nicer girls who tried to be friendly at first, but were soon pressured by girls who had more social power into shunning Nicole as well.

Her head lowered as she was filled with embarrassment from the memories. Yeah, but all that's over now. You don't have to see them for three whole months. And she wasn't going to miss any of them, either, except for maybe Cora. The only other girl at Beadlesway who was possibly shunned more than Nicole was Cora. Cora didn't have any friends, either. She had once been suspended for dyeing her hair green. When she came back, it was

jet black and cut short-- a stark contrast to normative blonde, brunette, and the occasional red manes that most girls at school sported. Cora was always getting in trouble for drawing during class, and her notes were covered in skulls and the logos of her favorite bands. For the entire first year of school, Nicole tried to muster up the courage to talk to Cora. But she was afraid she wasn't cool enough for Cora's tastes.

After finally making it home, Nicole flung her backpack down and settled down on her bed. She stared up at the ceiling and tried to understand the reality of school being out. Was she happy or sad? On one hand, she didn't have to put up with feeling like an outcast every time she stepped foot in school. But on the other hand, she was now facing an unfathomable boredom. Both of her parents were in France for some job-related thing she didn't fully understand. She was all alone.

She played all of the video games she had, and then she read all of her comic books. She went into the kitchen and read the ingredients on all of the packages of cereal. And then she poured five different types of cereal into a bowl, added milk and ate it all. Her stomach hurt, so she plopped down in front of the TV and flipped through the channels.

After trying out a few different shows, she finally found something on a home-and-gardening show about tailoring clothes. This intrigued her. One of the few times last year she had actually not felt like a shadow was when she helped with the costumes for the school play. The teachers had commended her for her work and one of the nicer girls even complimented her. As she sat in front of the TV watching as beautiful clothes were designed and put together, visions of the magnificent costumes worn by the heroes from her comics and video games swarmed around her head.

That was when she had the idea to design a super hero. Nicole sought out some paper and colored pencils, and after a few hours she had perfected the design: The Shadow. The costume was completely black. It had a hood that slightly hung down over the face, which was obscured by a black mask. She was afraid that it looked too much like a ninja, so she added a cape.

Wait—what if someone's already done this idea? She went to the computer and researched if anything else had ever been named The Shadow. She found out that it had been the name of some kind of detective radio show in the 1930s. But that Shadow was a detective and she was a superhero. So she decided she could keep the name.

What do I do now? Nicole studied her design. I've spent so much time working on this... and I have nothing else to do. I might as well try and make it. But what would she make it out of? She briefly considered going through her parents' extensive wardrobe and seeing if there would be any materials she could use in there, but decided against it-- cutting up an Armani suit sounded risky. She eventually decided to just go and buy the

fabric. She had been left a considerable amount of money while her parents were gone, and on top of her allowance, she had enough to buy some decent material.

As she rode to the fabric store on her bike, she realized she was grinning from ear to ear. She hadn't felt this happy in a long time. The store had just the kinds of fabric she was looking for. Back home, she found her sewing machine and got to work.

It took a few days to complete the entire costume. By the time she was done, her parents had returned home from their trip. She didn't dare tell them what she had been up to the last few days. They thought it was strange for a girl her age to be interested in superheroes, so she had stopped talking about them in front of her parents long ago. At dinner, all she could think about was the costume. She thought she had done a pretty good job getting the measurements right, but was still anxious to see how it looked on her.

Nicole didn't try on the costume on until after she was sure her parents had gone to sleep. She didn't really have any reason to fear them catching her with the costume on -- after all, they ignored her most of the time -- but still. This was something nobody could know about. Once she was sure they weren't going to be an issue, she carefully pulled on the black costume. She put on the mask and pulled the hood over her head. Then she slipped on the gloves, and finally put on a pair of black boots she had lying around.

As she looked into the mirror, she was shocked to see the transformation. No longer did she see a gawky, tall girl with stringy blonde hair but rather, a menacing figure clad in black. Being in the costume made her stand up straighter and walk with more confidence. She realized that she hadn't given her costume any kind of logo, but the more she looked at herself, the more she realized that she didn't really need one.

For the next few days, she would put the costume on whenever her parents were away, which was often. Then she would sneak around the house, pretending that she was fighting crime. She used to do gymnastics and ballet, and used what she remembered as she leapt off of couches and kitchen cabinets. One particularly harrowing day, Nicole forgot that the maid was coming in to clean. She had to sneak around the house in order to not be caught

After about a week of pretending to be a vigilante around the house, Nicole began to wonder what it would be like if she actually went outside in the costume.

People are gonna think I'm crazy, she thought. But she knew she wasn't crazy. She was just… bored.

She waited for an evening when her parents would be working late into the night to make her first appearance. She had made a utility belt which included important items such as a flashlight, a can of mace, and her cellphone, among other things. Nicole didn't think she was going to do anything

that could potentially endanger her, but it was still better to be on the safe side.

At first, all she did was sneak through people's yards and around buildings. The warm summer air was stifling and made her costume stick to her skin, but she paid no attention to it. She was filled with adrenaline. Not until now had she realized how agile she was. Maybe she wasn't so useless after all.

There weren't very many interesting things going on in Auburn Hills in the evening. For the first few nights of going out as The Shadow, she snuck around the well-maintained lawns and ostentatious homes, happy enough to feel like she was a real superhero. One night, she ventured onto a playground. It was empty except for a boy who looked to be about Nicole's age and another younger, much smaller boy.

The older boy had a deep voice. "If you don't give me your allowance, I'm gonna tell everyone you peed your pants at church."

"I did not!" squeaked the little one. "That's a lie, and you know it."

"Yeah, well, who're people gonna believe: you or me?"

As the two boys bickered, Nicole silently made her way up to the top of the nearby jungle gym.

"Why don't you have your own allowance? Your parents are loaded!" said the younger boy.

The older kid crossed his arms. "My parents aren't giving me any money ever since I set my sister's My Little Ponies on fire."

This is my moment. I could be a real hero. Before she could stop to think about the possible repercussions about what she was about to do, she shouted:

"Hey, you troglodyte!"

Both of the boys stared up at her, wide-eyed and slack-jawed. By a stroke of luck, she had positioned herself on the jungle gym directly in front of the setting sun. Her black costume was a stark contrast to the red behind her.

"What… what the hell?" said the older boy.

"Yeah, I'm talking to you!" she said. She was amazd at how calm her voice was. She paused. What should she say next? She thought about saying, Why don't you pick on somebody your own size? but that was just way, way too overdone.

"Who are you?" the younger boy asked.

"It doesn't matter who I am," Nicole said, and pointed a finger at the bully. "All that matters is that you get your ass out of here and leave this kid alone!"

The older guy's expression turned from shock to anger. "Why should I listen to you?"

"Because of this!" Before her mind could even process what she was doing, Nicole leapt from the jungle gym. Her cape spread out and helped her glide over to the boy, who stood frozen in his spot. She extended her foot, hoping to make contact with the boy's chest. But she didn't need to— seconds before she would have kicked him, the boy turned around and ran. Her ears were filled with the sound

of the younger boy's laughter.

"Look at him go! What a wuss!" cackled the smaller kid.

"Psycho!" the older kid shouted as he ran.

"Keep running!" Nicole shouted after him. "And leave your sister's ponies alone!"

She turned to the smaller kid, who was staring up at her with curiosity, but no fear.

"That was cool," said the kid. "Are you crazy?"

"Maybe," she said. With that, she took off and ran back into the darkness that had now settled upon her little suburban world.

As she ran, she started laughing. The sound was muffled under her mask. She felt light, like she could run straight into the sky if she wanted to. She had no idea how she had managed to get the courage to do what she had done, or if what she had done was right, but she did know one thing: She wanted to do it again.

That summer, Nicole snuck out of the house in her costume as often as she could. She would wait until she was sure that her parents would be gone for a while, so she had to keep track of their schedule. For the most part, not a lot happened during her escapades. But every few weeks, something would happen. She'd help a cat out of a tree, or she'd scare off a group of kids who were throwing rocks at a lost puppy. She helped a little girl get her Frisbee from the roof of her house. She even helped an old woman whose groceries had spilled all over her driveway. They weren't extravagant acts of heroism by any means, but they were pretty good for a shadow.

Not everyone responded to her costume in a positive way. On more than one occasion, Nicole had to run for her life and hide because a group of people had decided to chase her. The first time that happened, she didn't go out as The Shadow for three full weeks.

But she kept doing it, because it made her happy. When she was The Shadow, she felt like she was capable of anything. She didn't feel like boring, average Nicole. Before she knew it, the summer was over and school had started again. But she noticed that as she stepped into Beadlesway every day, her heart felt less heavy. She didn't feel as hopeless sitting through her classes. When she ate lunch by herself, things were a little less depressing knowing that sooner or later she would be The Shadow again, bringing a tiny bit of justice to Auburn Hills.

A few weeks into the school year, Nicole started hearing rumors. Did you hear about that weirdo who dresses up and pretends to be a superhero? Yeah, nobody knows who it is. Just some freak. And all Nicole could do was smile.

One night in the middle of September, she came across something unusual. The first thing that happened was that she heard a loud scream. She thought that someone was being attacked, but the next thing she heard was pounding music and laughter. Someone was having a house party... As she got closer to the house, she realized that it

belonged to the Del Reys—who were on vacation! Their kids must have been throwing the party.

She crept closer to the house and climbed up the fence in the backyard. She saw teenagers her age staggering around the back yard. They were all holding those generic red cups that seem to go hand in hand with drunken escapades. Nicole started to climb back down the fence—after all, what could she do? But then she saw a girl fall into the pool. The girl started to thrash around and cry for help, but her friend just started laughing and staggered back into the house. The only other people in the back yard were some guy passed out in a lawn chair, and two people who were---Oh god! What are they doing? Gross.

Before she could think, Nicole jumped from the fence into the Del Reys' back yard. She sprinted to the pool and helped the girl climb out. The girl's breath smelled like alcohol, and she got Nicole's costume wet and messed up the cape as she clutched at her. Before Nicole could even feel good about what she had done, there were bright lights all around and loud voices yelling something about a noise disturbance. She could make out flashing red and blue lights. Oh, crap.

That night, she learned what it was like to ride in a cop car—specifically, what it was like to ride in a cop car in a wet superhero costume. At the station, she kept wishing that it was a month later, so that she could have explained her costume as being part of a Halloween party. Her parents were silent on the ride back home. She tried to explain that she wasn't really getting drunk and had just been dressing up as a superhero and sneaking out to fight crime for the last several months, but they refused to say anything.

She had forgotten that one of the gossipier girls at school was the daughter of a cop. The entire student body (and probably the faculty) knew everything before she went back to school—that she was the weirdo who had been running around dressed as a superhero. Before everything that had happened, Nicole used to think that there was nothing that could possibly make Beadlesway worse. But she was wrong.

She wasn't just ignored now. As she walked down the hallways, she could hear people talking about her, and suddenly stop as if holding their breath as she walked by. In class, she could feel everyone else staring at her. And then there were the whispers and the sudden bursts of laughter hidden behind hands.

Maybe I can convince my parents to transfer me to a different school.

By lunch time, she was so worn down by the others that she had to go into a bathroom stall to cry. Why did she do this? How could she have been so stupid to think she would never be caught? How was she ever going to live this down?

Nicole wiped her eyes with some toilet paper and left the stall. She was startled to see someone else at the sink. She immediately recognized the jet

black hair of Cora.

Oh, no. Does she think I'm a freak, too?

She kept her head down as she washed her hands, trying not to make eye contact. But out of nowhere, Cora said, "Hey."

"Uh," Nicole stammered.

"I just want to let you know that I think what you did was really badass."

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You really think that?"

Cora laughed. "Yeah. It's like the coolest thing that has ever happened around here. What did your parents do when they found out?"

"Well... they didn't say anything for a long time. They thought I was drinking, but I passed the breathalyzer test. I think they would rather have me drinking underage than doing the superhero thing. I think they're going to make me go to therapy."

Cora laughed, but when she spoke sounded sympathetic. "That's okay. My parents made me go to therapy once. It sucked. By the way, what happened to the costume?"

"Oh yeah. My parents confiscated it."

"That blows. I had really wanted to see it so that I could draw it."

"Well..." Nicole was almost too afraid to say what she was thinking, but then she remembered: I am The Shadow. I've done stuff way scarier than this. She finally said, "I still have all the designs and stuff. If you want, you could come over and I could show them to you."

Cora's eyes grew wide. "That'd be awesome!"

They exchanged numbers and left because the bell for class was about to ring.

As she walked to class, a group of girls started laughing and then whispered about her. Nicole started to put her head down to hide behind her hair, but then stopped. She pretended she was in her costume. Head up. Shoulders back. Stand straight. No more feeling bad for yourself. She had an image to maintain. After all, she was The Shadow. §

A Conversation with God While Waiting on Pizza Delivery

Scott Thompson

The lights suddenly power on in the empty Kallas Shoe Shop, humming lightly as long, fluorescent bulbs always do. You take note of the time, 8:26 PM, which is forever programmed in your circuitry. Though, sometimes, you can wind up ahead or behind a minute. You don't know why that happens. Mounted to the wall, you pivot toward the front door of the small shoe store and see no movement. Pivoting the other way, you see Mr. Kallas hanging up his coat on the employee rack next to the back door. His shoes are caked with light snow, which, by your count, began to officially fall at 6:42 PM that day, eighteen minutes before closing time.

Mr. Kallas had let his two employees go home early to beat the storm. "Go on," you have stored in your internal memory, "before the snow gets any worse. I'll close up tonight." A kind man, as far as you had recorded over the past eight months, one week and five days since being installed on the left wall of the mostly rectangular shop. Mr. Kallas lived in the apartment above the store, and late at night you could hear him walking around loudly from one end of the small apartment to the other. Bedroom to kitchen? Living room to bathroom? You could never know.

Monitoring the shop was fine. You had seen plenty in your brief stint on duty. Three weeks after installation, you helped Mr. Kallas identify and fire an employee, young and still in high school, who had been pulling money out of the deposits before putting them in the safe at the end of the night. Then there was the employee who had been smoking marijuana in the bathroom. An older woman, in her 40's, never married and no children. She made the mistake of tightly rolling her joint in the break room before taking it into the bathroom, where you have no access. You even helped identify the man who held the store up at gun point, yelling viciously to the twenty three year old female employee, "Put the fucking money in the bag or me shooting you in your fat fucking face will be the least of your worries." She put in her two weeks notice the next day.

But for the better part of eight months, one week and five days you have watched the store operate normally. Tonight is different, though. You only have one recorded instance of Mr. Kallas coming down to the store after hours, and that was to reclaim his forgotten wallet. You watch intently as he kicks the snow off his shoes and curses lightly under his breath.

Mr. Kallas makes his way across the store and to his small office, tucked into the right corner of the rented space. Though you are mounted on the furthest wall from his office, you can still see into the office through the open door, where paper is stacked high in plastic organizational trays on each side of Mr. Kallas's computer monitor. Some of the papers are colored in bright green and red. There is

also a picture of two children push-pinned to the wall. They have not been to the store in at least eight months, one week and five days. Mr. Kallas stares at the piles of paper for exactly six seconds before sitting down.

He boots up his computer and, after three minutes and ten seconds, double-clicks an Excel spreadsheet titled "Sales." Six seconds later, the file is displayed on the monitor, a cacophony of red cells and numerical figures led mostly by negative signs. Mr. Kallas sighs heavily and opens the right desk drawer. He pulls out a receipt book and enters the day's sales total into the spread sheet, something he usually saves for 8:30 AM, when he first walks into the store with his silver mug of coffee. A press of the enter key, and several cells instantly update as stored equations make quick work of the new information. Still, the spreadsheet is dressed in crimson.

Two minutes pass while you watch Mr. Kallas stare at the screen. He is sternly focused, and three lines cut straight across his forehead, just below his thinning white hair. He finally closes the spreadsheet, making sure to save his changes. He then reaches for the handset of the phone on the corner of his desk. He opens Internet Explorer and searches for the number to Leonardo's Pizzeria on Google. The seven digits are punched in quickly, and he puts the handset to his ear.

"Yeah I'd like a large pizza for delivery. Extra cheese, pepperoni and mushrooms." He pauses as he listens to the employee on the other line, indiscernible to you.

"It's for Cliff Kallas." More listening then.

"That's the place. Thanks."

Mr. Kallas returns the handset, removes his glasses, and puts his head down on the desk. You watch him sit that way for twenty-two seconds before he stands up and walks toward the coat rack on the other side of the store. You pivot on your wall mount and see him reach into his coat pocket and pull out a cigarette. Despite the posted rules about not smoking on store grounds, he lights it and leans against the nearby wall. Slowly filling his lungs with the smoke, he lifts his head and spews it into the space above him. It wafts gently through the air, making intricate designs. He takes one last puff, opens the back door, and throws the cigarette out. It took him all of four minutes and fifteen seconds.

He takes his coat off the rack and brings it back with him to the office, draping it over his desk chair. It's a long, tan trench coat that has been noticeably patched in several places. Once back in his seat, the open browser is sent to YouTube. He types in the search bar, slowly and one key at a time, "women in bikinis." The next eleven minutes and forty six seconds are spent watching various videos; some are amateur in nature -- girlfriends filmed by their boyfriends on days out at the beach -- and others are slideshows of models in bikinis set to music. You watch him watch them. He sits motionless, staring at the images.

He eventually closes the videos and opens a new tab in his browser. He returns to Google, and

this time searches "least painful ways to kill yourself." His screen is flooded with blue links to webpages about suicide. The first few links are forum posts, where people communicate back and forth on the topic. One offers advice such as "falling asleep in a burning house." Another suggests "being black in a rich, white neighborhood." He stops to read about a sleeping drug sold legally in Mexico that can be easily purchased and overdosed on. Finally, Mr. Kallas arrives at Wikipedia, and spends five minutes and six seconds reading a long list of suicide methods, from hanging to Seppuku, the ancient Japanese method where one cuts open his own stomach. Mr. Kallas leans back in his chair and looks up toward the ceiling.

Fifty two seconds later, he begins to sob. He attempts to muffle the sounds by placing his hands over his face. You can still hear him. Between heavy breaths he mumbles to himself, to no one, "I'm so sorry – I tried – I can't – all alone – the point? – miss – hate – so sorry." He finally pulls his hands away, makes his right one into a fist and slams it on the desk. There is a knock at the front door. Mr. Kallas wipes his nose with his left sleeve. He is calm again.

You pivot and see the pizza delivery boy through the all-glass front door. He is young, maybe in his early twenties, and his car behind him thumps loudly with the bass of his sound system. Mr. Kallas waves as he walks toward the front door. Snow spills inward when he finally unlocks it and pushes it open.

"Hey hey, Mr. K. Late night working munchies, huh?"

"You know me, Brian. Crunching numbers always works up an appetite." His voice is rasp.

"I hear ya. It'll be $15.79."

Mr. Kallas pulls a twenty and a five from his wallet and hands them to Brian. "There you go, keep the change."

"Thanks a lot, Mr. K. Don't work too hard tonight, I'll be coming in tomorrow to get new soles on my boots, since it looks like I'll be wearing them for a while now. I'll need you at your best. Take it easy."

"Will do. Goodnight, Brian."

The lock clicks loudly into place as Mr. Kallas balances his pizza on one hand. He then places it on the table in the break room and returns to his office. He powers down his computer, grabs his coat, and spends nine seconds staring at the picture of the children. The lights click off, and a loud sigh can be heard as the back door opens and closes one final time for the night at 9:09 PM.

You continue to monitor the empty shop, lit every so often by the headlights of passing cars. The sound of foot prints in the apartment above punctures the silence of the small shoe store, carrying on for several hours into the night before stopping all at once. It is now 1:25 AM, and you continue to store silent darkness in your memory, pivoting to and fro as you are meant to. §

A Man Walks Into A Bar

Josh Leep

I walked into a bar one night. I don't even remember the name of the place. It was pretty dimly lit, as a lot of bars usually seem to be. The first thing I noticed as I came in was the repugnant stench of a rancid blend of different brands of cigarette smoke that had entered my nostrils. I didn't cough or anything though because I was used to such detestable smells. My mom was a smoker and I had gotten used to it at an early age.

When I took a couple steps in, the guy at the door checked my ID to make sure I wasn't just some under aged punk kid trying to sneak into a bar to get alcohol. I found it kind of funny that I was still getting carded because I clearly looked my age. I took a seat up at the bar that wasn't surrounded by anyone else. I didn't feel like talking to anyone that night. All I wanted was some to be served a beer and sit in my own little world while I listened to the overplayed "hits" that were coming out of the loudspeakers in the place.

As I sat in the aging bar stool that barely had any cushioning left, I propped my arms up on the wooden counter top and waved for the bar keep to come over to where I was sitting. When he got over he looked me in the eye and raised his head a little like most bar keeps do to signify the fact that they are waiting for you to ask for whatever it is you want to drink.

"I'll have a shot of Jack." I muttered to my server. I know it seems a bit much to start out with hard stuff so soon into the night, but I almost always start out my bar visits with a shot. He nodded and said "That'll be five bucks." I shook my head a bit because of how much I felt I was being ripped off, but I pulled out my worn out leather wallet and handed him over what I owed anyway. The bar keep took my hard earned cash and came back with my change and the shot I asked for.

I took my change and just left it on the bar because I knew I was only going to be spending more of it in only a short amount of time. As the bar keep walked away, I lifted up my glass slowly, but not too slowly and gulped it right down. It punched me in the face, just the way a good shot of Jack Daniels should.

"Only here a few minutes and you're already hitting the hard stuff? You sure are quick to get to the meat and potatoes of a night at the bar," said a nearby voice aimed in my direction.

I turned around to see who had made this commentary on my choice of beverages. I saw a man with long, oily gray hair in a ponytail and had some dirty looking teeth. He was dressed in a suit that looked like it had been made 30 years ago and hadn't been washed in at least that long. It smelled like it too, that's for sure.

"Yeah? What of it?", I responded.

"Must have a reason for going to the whiskey so quickly.", my malodorous new acquaintance said

in a questioning tone.

"What's it to you, old man?"

"Well what is it? A woman? Lost your job? Family problems?"

"Why don't you mind your own business? I'm trying to have a quiet night by myself here."

"If you wanted to do that, wouldn't you have just stayed home and drank in your living room? Doesn't make much sense for you to come to a bar if you don't want to interact with anyone."

I just shook my head, sighed, and turned my face back toward the bar. I was starting to get annoyed with my uninvited companion and his overly persistent pestering for details about things that were quite frankly none of his business at all. I asked the bar keep to give me a MGD. The moment I ordered my drink, the old man decided to take a place at the bar right next to me and sat down. In my mind I let out one of the biggest groans you could imagine.

"So what's got you looking so weary and drinking hard liquor the moment you step in the place?"

"Nothing. I just felt like stopping in for a while."

"No one does what you're doing for no reason."

I was starting to get extremely fed up with his questions. I couldn't help but wonder. How could this man who does not know me in the slightest be so god-damn interested in why I had ordered a shot of whiskey the moment I sat down at the bar? I decided that if he wanted a reason for me drinking a shot of Jack so soon into my visit to this crappy bar, that I was going to give him one whether it was true or not. I just wanted this old geezer who was in a horribly desperate need of a bath, a set of clean cloths from this century, and a visit to the dentist off of my back so that I could be left to myself to imbibe my alcohol in peace.

"OK, old man. You really wanna know why I'm hitting the hard stuff so early while coming to a bar even though I want to be alone? All right. I'm a traveler of both time and space and I've just lost a very good friend of mine due to an invasion of evil fire hydrant robots on Alpha Centauri in your world's 49th century."

The man just stood there staring at me blankly with his mouth just hanging open. I began to chuckle at him because of how dumb he looked just standing there like that. It was probably the best I had felt all evening at that point. After about a minute of laughing at him, the man smiled and laughed a little bit himself.

"Ahhh… Going the whole mocking route, I see. I've dealt with your kind before. I'll crack you yet."

"Why do you want to crack me? What does my choice of beverages really matter to you anyway?"

"Like I said, no one hits the hard booze so early on into a visit to a bar unless they have some heavy reasoning."

"You don't know that for certain."

"OK. Most people don't do hard liquor initially unless something is weighing on them."

"How do you figure? What makes you think you have all the answers?"

"Trust me, son. I've been around the block a few more times than you have. I've seen it for myself."

I let out a bit of a groan and put my face in my palms. This unkempt geezer was getting to be more than just a nuisance. I was thinking desperately of any way to get him out of my hair as quickly as possible.

"All I'm asking is you tell me what's going on."

"You still haven't told me why you want to know so god-damn badly."

"Because I'm a people watcher. You seem like there is more to you than meets the eye. When you ordered your drink, I knew I had to go and find out a little more about you."

"Oh God… So you're one of those people, huh? One of those annoying extroverts who has to get to know everything about everyone?"

"You make that sound like it's a bad thing."

"When I'm just trying to drink in peace, it is."

"Yeah, but like I already said, you could have stayed home if you wanted that. It would have been cheaper too."

"Well maybe drinking at home isn't exactly an option for me at the moment."

"Oh… Now you're opening up!"

"No, I said maybe its not an option. I didn't say for certain it wasn't."

I could feel hotness in my head that was beginning to keep me from staying calm and thinking straight. I knew I had to control myself, but it was getting harder and harder by the moment. This bastard can clearly see I don't feel like talking to him. Why the hell does he keep persisting? I'm not in the mood for this shit at all…

"So why can't you drink at home?"

"Will you get the hell off my back?"

"Do you have no place to go?"

"Don't worry about it."

"You on a trip?"

The constant pelting of daggers that were his questions had finally pushed me over the edge. My eyes widened, I slammed my hands down on the table, stood up, and launched my fist into a quick rendezvous with his grime-ridden mug. He toppled over to the floor and landed with a booming thud. I walked over to him and looked down.

I said to him, "I came here to drink in peace because my wife had me locked out of my apartment. I would have loved to have drunk in the comfort of my Lazy Boy, but Perla has decided that my brother is a much better man than I will ever be. As for my choice in beverages, I always start my visits to a bar off with Jack Daniels; even if I'm in a perfectly good mood. But now that you've gone and pissed me off to the point where I laid your ass out on the bar room floor, I'm going to have to leave here because I've gone and started a ruckus. I

probably won't be able to come back here now, either. I know its my own choice that I punched you, but you still pushed me over the edge. Thank you. You're such a wonderful man."

As I was walking away, I turned around and said one more thing to him.

"Oh and by the way; take a shower, brush your teeth, and start washing your cloths. You smell fucking terrible." §

Photo: Ike Obi

A Secondhand Biography of Fate

Kayla Greenwell

An old man walked through the forest, clutching his cane like it was his only chance of survival. He had started early that morning, neglecting to pack food for himself in his hurry. Gritting his teeth he dug the cane farther into the ground. Everything about his life had turned out miserable, but heaven be damned if it was going to end that way. He hated all of it, but nothing more than himself.

. . .

Months before the man's wife suddenly left him after 30 years of what, well, what he had considered, a good marriage. He was heartbroken and forlorn without his wife, but from hearsay and lawyers he discovered she had already moved on to richer and more attractive things. He hadn't realized how much he couldn't do on his own, or hadn't had to do on his own. He was cleaning the attic out to make room for a few things when he found the book.

At first he didn't think anything of it and tossed to the side. Right next to the broken dollhouse whose only inhabitants were cobwebs and the tiny skeleton of a mouse that never made it. The paper was the only thing worth reading. But the soft leather cover tempted him to pick it up again for a second look. Maybe the loss of his beloved wife had driven him a little crazy, or maybe it was just loneliness, but something about that book made the man unable to leave it imprisoned in the dusty confines of the attic. He set it aside next to the staircase to carry down with him after he finished his mission.

As the weeks went by the ground started to thaw and bud by bud the trees started to breathe their life back. The book was forgotten, left on the ledge of an old oak coffee table for another day. Spring slowly turned into summer and the man kept himself busy with chores in the yard. And after a time the sun gave way to the moon and green gave way to gold and red.

That fall the air always smelled the way it did after a long rain. As if the water had knocked all the pollution out of the air and left the sky truly empty. The mailbox was full, but there were no letters that day, or any other day for that matter. It was always junk mail and bills. What else was the post office good for? Mariella, his only daughter, hadn't rang in months. Puzzles scattered across the kitchen table were the only thing that helped time pass.

He watched the world falling asleep before his eyes and thought in that instant that maybe he could join in; maybe he could join the world in its endless slumber.

The leaves on the trees watched in hushed whispers as he put his affairs together. Bills were paid and the house was cleaned until it smelled vaguely like a hospital. Even long neglected house plants received careful attention. As he was putting the final touches on his cleaning he found the book,

its leather covered in a thin layer of dust.

He sighed and held the book in both of his hands, remembering the cold winter day he cleaned the attic. Tears filled his cloudy grey eyes as he thought about all he had lost and all he would never have. He was too old to start over again. He was broken, useless; he had given all that he had and he had nothing to show for it, nothing but some shirts and an empty house in the hills.

He sat down on his couch and opened the book slowly, running his fingers over the the soft, worn cover. The ink was faded and the title was impossible to decipher. The man sighed as he leafed through the pages only to realize that the text inside was unreadable. Frustrated by another disappointment he did not notice the single tear that fell between the pages.

He did not notice when he put the book down that the illustrations began to darken and become vivid, or when the pictures on the cover began to move. It was only when the pictures began to call to him that the man realized there was something different in the air. They called him in voices so small that although they were yelling it was still hard to not mistake their voluminous voices for whispers.

The man considered seeing a psychiatrist two days after hearing the voices for the first time. After finishing his dinner, however, he chose not to waste the money. After all, the voices he was hearing couldn't have been real. A week after this decision he started seeing the shadows.

Christ, he thought, what the hell is going on? He decided to take a drive into town, praying he wouldn't see or hear anything out of the ordinary. It was the first time he had prayed in a long time.

In town he could stop by the library and maybe pick up some books on 'seeing things'. It was about 15 minutes before he would hit the edge of civilization and even then, the library was about the size of a classroom, with only five or six stacks.

The praying continued on the way to his destination, keeping the radio on low. He wasn't much for music, but he learned quickly after his wife left that it was better than silence.

The library was closed when he got there.

. . .

He clutched his chest as he walked through the woods, his lungs burning with past neglect. He was honestly surprised his heart hadn't just given up, but his death was worth the trip. After all, who wants to live when they have nothing to live for? But he knew even as the thought passed through him that he didn't quite believe it.

The trees were getting thicker and he had to catch himself from falling more than once. The cane was completely useless. Even when he was younger he had never traveled this far into the woods. There was no need.

"You have no sense of adventure," his wife would say. As another thorn stuck into his leg through his khakis, he regretted leaving the book

at home, where a map to his destination stained the front page.

. . .

One month after he had started seeing the shadows, strangers started to visit him in his sleep. They were still shadows at first, clouding the bright sky of his dreams, but they quickly began to take shape.

"Hello," is all they would say.

"What are you?" Alfred would reply.

After a long period of two-line dialogue and restless sleep, the man shuffled to the living room and sat on his couch. As he sat there, staring at a blank wall until he remembered the book. He couldn't believe what he saw. The old leather had been polished and smelled just like new. It was impossible.

Out of the sheen came a design: a large tree took up most of the cover, magnificent in its natural power. Around the outside was a design of leaves and vines, and intertwined with the greenery were creatures. He did not want to call them fairies although they had wings, but they weren't angels. He ran his fingers over the newly refreshed cover. Certainly this wasn't the same book? He opened the book and the room spun with movement of shadows. There was only one whisper, just one.

Alfred.

. . .

This far into the woods Alfred couldn't see the sun through the trees. It was midnight at midday. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end and his heart, despite its exhaustion, beat faster than ever before.

"I'm here," he yelled.

"Alfred," said a voice. Suddenly he wasn't so confident. He coughed into his handkerchief one more time before throwing it to the ground.

"I followed the map. I could read it," he yelled, his voice hoarse from dehydration. The trees sucked in the sound of his voice as if they were the secrets of a long forgotten language.

. . .

That night he had slammed the book shut and sat in his living room until the sun rose, watching the shadows play on the walls. The vibration from the book had left a feeling of false numbness on his fingers. He was sure that he was losing, if not already lost his mind. But even though he knew that should frighten him, for the first time in over a year he finally felt at peace.

A week later his daughter called. In a flurry of fast-paced vernacular she raged about the cruelty and selfishness of "Some people."

"I know he's cheating on her," she said angrily, with a conviction that Alfred knew only her mother could have taught her. He just let her speak, wondering if she knew he was the last person on earth to talk to about this. But he didn't say anything. Even though he didn't want to talk, hers was the first outside voice he'd heard in months.

He contemplated living a life within the limits

of human interaction again. He thought of when the voice on the end of the phone was in diapers and the windows glowed with spring sunshine.

Hours passed and he found himself lying in bed, thinking about the telephone conversation with his daughter. Those thoughts eventually drug him out of bed and into the living room, where the wooden floor was cold despite the early autumn weather. The floorboards creaked under the pressure of his bare feet as he walked towards the old wooden table that took up most of the space in the room. At the edge of it, the book lay silent.

He lowered himself onto the cloth covered springs that was once called a couch. An old dog he could no longer name had ripped out most of the cushioning. The book had started vibrating as soon as he picked it up, and tonight he was sure he wanted to know what it said. After all, reading is what you're supposed to do when you have a good book.

The first page was a map. Immaculately drawn in ink and watercolor, he instantly recognized it as the woods surrounding his house. He didn't utter a word, or even raise his eyebrows in surprise. His incredulity was beaten out by loneliness and a vicious curiosity.

. . .

When the Earth was born, and the stars wrote her name in the sky with their constellations, the three sisters of Cosmos came to see this shiny, infant world. Seeing what their dear sister had created, they burned with jealousy. Why could they not have their own?

The sisters, knowing they could never create something so vast, decided to recreate themselves.

"You are the fates," they said to their creations, "You will live on our dear sister's creation and you will rule it. She will have no power there."

The fates then took the skies of Earth and began their work. Excited by the idea of death, they evolved creatures with temporary lives. They built civilizations for the sake of watching them fall. Earth was their favorite toy and Cosmos could do nothing but watch as they twisted her world into their own.

One day, after a long while, when men came, the fates realized they had created something too similar to themselves. Man approached them with no fear.

"I don't want to die," man said. But the fates disagreed. Only they, Cosmos and her sisters were allowed to live forever. So the fates decided to play a game.

"Here is a map," they said, "If you can decipher it and find us before your time is up, we will restart your life from whichever point you choose. You can have your life all over again."

"And what will happen to you?" man asked, looking among the three fates.

"If a man finds us, we give our life to restart his," they said, sure they would win.

Man agreed and the game began. It has never

ended.

. . .

In the darkness of the inner woods, Alfred no longer stood alone. Nine feet tall, the figure in front of him called his name again. §

Photo: Michael Roach

An Outside Chance

Evan Hixon

Robert Walsh was a tall Irish son of a bitch, and he was easily my closest friend in the state of Massachusetts. My last two hours had been spent driving from my apartment just off the BC campus to his parent's house to watch the Red Sox play and I was none too happy with my decision. Most of my day had been spent trying to find a good enough reason to excuse myself from Robert's party, but ultimately, I couldn't bring myself to abandon my best friend on a night that he would certainly need me to be there for him.

Sunday October 17th, 2004 was an unusually cold uneasy night for the suburbs of Boston. The streets were empty, save for the occasional mass of parked cars indicating a house that was having a party to watch the game. It was going to be a long drive home tonight when all the people watching the game returned home, and I knew I had an early class on Monday that they would likely make me miss. However, that really had nothing to do with why I didn't want to be here. It wasn't even that I didn't want to watch the game. I had inherited a love of the Red Sox from my father, and three years of school in Massachusetts had done nothing to harm that. It had more to do with knowing that Sox were on their final leg, and the last way I wanted to spend my night was with three dozen drunken engineering students slowly watching the Red Sox season die.

It was a little after five o'clock when I finally reached Robert's parents' home. The amount of cars in front of the home let me know that the party was already in full swing, so I let myself in. Not a full minute had past when Robert found me, and hit with a running hug hard enough to knock me off my feet. "Davin, good to see you, was afraid you weren't going to make it." He took a brief pause to look me over, which even now was an intimidating experience as he stood a full foot taller than me. "Heard your interview at the museum was this week. How did that go?"

A smile crept across my face. Robert knew me well enough not to jump right into baseball talk. "Pretty damn well. I think the organizers loved my ideas for the modern art wing and I really think I impressed them with my familiarity with their collection. Not often knowing way too much about early 20th century surrealism pays off. Should hear back from them any day now." Robert was always an incredibly supportive friend, but he really didn't know nor care much about art history, so I spared him too much of a gushing rant

"Fucking awesome." The game had just entered the second inning, so the silence hung as the entire party became quiet. "So, what do you think of the Sox's chances tonight?"

"After last night, I'm not holding my breath. If they only lose by single digits, I'll be happy." I forced a laugh. Robert did not join me. The night

before, Boston had lost by 11 runs and the team was hanging on by a thread. "Besides, is Lowe really a guy you can trust to pitch in an elimination game?"

"You got to be more positive man, they are gonna turn it around tonight. I still got a feeling that this is the year. We win these next two at Fenway and carry all the momentum back into Yankee Stadium. It's all about momentum."

"You said that last year, and I remember the two day drinking binge that we went through after they were eliminated, even if you don't."

"That's the past man. You want something to drink?" He said, turning towards the fridge to grab a beer.

"No, not tonight. I have to drive back for class tomorrow."

"Your loss. Game is on in the other room, you should try and get a seat."

Nodding, I walked into the next room. About two dozen people were crammed into a tiny living room, intently staring at the 62 inch TV which was mounted onto the wall. I didn't recognize the bulk of the people in the room. I assumed that most of them were friends of Robert from the engineering school, so I found a nice spot to stand towards the back and began trying to enjoy the game. That would be no easy feat however. Tensions were running high, and like me the vast majority of the people here had given up on the season after last night's rout. Now, watching the game was just a slow painful crawl towards the inevitable.

By the time the second inning had ended, I was seriously considering writing tomorrow off just to let myself drink as a way of sating my nerves, when for the second time tonight, I was nearly taken off my feet by a running hug. "Davin! I figured you were gonna leave me here by myself."

Staggering back to my feet, my brain finally processed who had just jumped on me. "Maki. I didn't think you were going to be here." Machiko 'Maki' Booker was a mutual friend of Robert and mine's, probably the only other non-engineering student at this event and the current object of my unrequited affection. Unrequited being the important word. I had never really broached the topic, mostly because she was my friend and I wanted to avoid things getting awkward. I had certainly always wanted to, and felt that it was merely a matter of waiting for the right moment to present itself. I didn't like playing the long game, but it seemed like the best play. "Wait, do you even like baseball?" Maki was certainly not the kind of person you would expect to see at a BC student's 'let's get drunk and watch baseball' party.

"Not really. Rob just told me that he was having a party, so I figured, ehh, why not?" she said, subtly fixing the hem of her torn mini-skirt. Maki dressed like a punk rocker from the seventies, torn mini-skirt, tight Union Jack T-Shirt, light blue streaks running through her otherwise solid black hair, deliberately torn leggings that contrasted a pair of nearly knee high boots. I was almost too

struck by how gorgeous she looked to speak. She was that rare kind of unfairly beautiful and as I met her eyes, I seriously began to reconsider my 'long game' idea.

"Yeah," I said, relaxing my posture, "me too. Honestly not all that thrilled about watching this game."

"I thought you were a big fan of the Sox?" She said.

"Oh, I am, it's just that after la...." A deafening roar from the rest of the living room cut me off. The Yankees had just hit a home run going up 2-0. "You know what. It is gonna be damn hard to talk down here. Let's go upstairs, I'll explain up there." Maki nodded her head vigorously and followed me out of the room. We stopped by the kitchen to grab a few beers before heading upstairs.

The room was mostly barren as Robert had taken most of his things to school, leaving only a bed, a desk and an old desktop computer here for when he came home. However, the bed was comfortable enough to sit on, there was a chair and we were far enough away from the rest of the party that their screaming would keep me up to date on the game without deafening us. I took a seat at the desk chair and handed Machiko a beer.

"So, you really aren't that interested in watching the game?"

"Not really," I said, picking the conversation back up, "I mean, I wouldn't be opposed to watching it, but it's been a long week and honestly, I don't feel too confident in the Sox chances tonight. After last night, I really don't feel like putting myself through that again. Besides, I would much rather hang out with you than sit around with a ton of people I don't know. Plus, their screaming should keep me up to date on the important stuff anyway"

"I guess that makes sense." She said, agreeing somewhat instinctively. I knew Maki didn't really get the baseball fan mentality, which I always thought was weird considering how many other weird things she was a fan of. "Did you have your interview for the Modern Art internship yet?"

"Yeah, went up to the city on Tuesday. I really think that I nailed it." I said, finding that dividing my attention between Maki and the crowd downstairs was harder than I thought it would. There was a lull, which probably meant that nothing important was happening.

"That's great; you have to tell me the story. Did you get to see the backrooms? Was the Dali exhibit still there?" She asked me, this time with legitimate interest in her voice. Maki had a strange kind of voice, the kind of high pitched sing-songy voice that most people found annoying, but I found melodic.

We were both art history majors, so I didn't feel the need to simplify the details for her. I spent a good thirty minutes retelling the whole story. My last month had been devoted to prepping for the interview and was glad to finally have someone to share all the details with. Robert was a great friend,

but even he could only feign interest in my speeches for so long. Maki, on the other hand, loved listening to me ramble on about the world of modern art. For the next hour or so was spent talking shop, everything from complaining about classes to Maki spending twenty explaining paper she was writing about the Dadaist movement. As she was speaking, I couldn't help but get lost in her eyes again. I imagined the two of visiting the city, eating a fancy dinner then visiting an exposition I helped organize. It was a wonderful thought and I promised myself that I would do anything to make it a reality.

I had almost forgotten that there was a baseball game on when another burst of noise came from downstairs, good noise this time. A few moments later Robert burst into the room, clearly a handful of beers further along than when I last left him. "Davin, Ortiz just lined a single and scored two, it's 3-2. You have to come watch this game." He looked around the room, finally noticing that Maki was here, waving to him. "Ahh, so, I'm gonna be downstairs, great game by the way, you really should come watch it." He said, quickly attempting to excuse himself.

"Before you go." Maki called, "You mind if I check something online?" Robert shouted something I couldn't hear back and Maki started booting up the fairly old computer. Ten minutes past as she sat at the computer checking various things I was too preoccupied to pay attention to when another round of noise came from the living room. This time, it was a low guttural moan. I knew that lead was too good to last.

"You should check to see if the museum got back to you. You said that they should have sent information by now." Eagerly, I moved towards the computer. Best case scenario, the acceptance letter is in my inbox and I can use that as a segue to ask Machiko to come to the museum with me. Worst case scenario, I have two great friends around when I get the rejection letter, plus I'm having a great evening already. Sitting down, I logged into my campus e-mail address. It took me no time to find the letter, a polite, simple form rejection letter. I sat stunned for a moment.

"Well, there were a ton of great applicants. Maybe there will be a position open sometime in the future." I said attempting to brush this off, "Oh, well, Que Sera Sera and what not." Quickly, I finished the remainder of my beer and grabbed the last one we had brought up.

"Don't feel bad." She said, "You want to go watch the game?"

"No. I'm actually enjoying myself quite a bit up here. Plus, if anything big happens, Robert will be up here. It's like I'm not even missing the game."

We spent the next two hours talking about everything we could think of. Work, classes, video games, anything to help pass the time and keep us entertained at what was turning out to be a fairly boring party. The noises from the living room were becoming more tense and frequent, meaning the

game was winding down, but since Robert hadn't come back up here, I could assume that nothing major had happened. Robert knew I had feelings for Machiko, but he also would never forgive himself if he let me miss a major Red Sox playoff game. Casually, I glanced at my watch, and was shocked to see how much time had passed. Knowing that I would want to at least see the last out, I motioned to the door. "The game is probably almost over by now; want to go watch the end of it?"

We went downstairs and the living room was on pins and needles. Rivera, arguably the best closer ever, was pitching with the Red Sox down a run in the ninth. Even at this tense moment, I was only half interested in the game at this point. There was no way I was getting my hopes up for a comeback now. My lack of faith was swiftly rewarded with Trot Nixon forcing a walk. No reason to get too excited. Then, something strange happened. That small walk turned into a stolen base and a single into left. The room suddenly erupted with the most ear-drum shattering chorus of shouts I had ever heard as the Red Sox inched out a run to send the game into extra innings.

Near the top of the tenth, Maki nudged me and we went into the kitchen for a drink. "Hey, I have a long drive ahead of me, so I think I'm gonna cut out." Maki said, playing with her bottle of water. "Before I go though, some of my friends were talking about starting a Vampire: The Masquerade game. You interested in playing." I paused to think. Tonight had turned out to be a pretty damn good night. I thought "If she has to do, I'll walk her to her car and talk to her about a trip to the city. Just because I didn't get the internship doesn't mean we can't go to the museum.

"Yeah, I would be down." I replied, only half listening. "Anyone I know playing?"

"Probably not, I mostly know them through my boyfriend." That I did hear.

"Cool," I said, attempting to keep from having to acknowledge what she had just said. Though, I don't think I managed all that well. There was an awkward moment of silence between the two of us, then we hugged, she left and I quietly returned to the game, feeling legitimately blindsided.

Finding Robert amongst the crowd, I pulled him aside and sheepishly asked, "hey...did you know Maki was seeing someone?"

"Yeah," he said, struggling to split his attention, "she told me when she got here. Figured it wasn't my place to tell you. Look, I know she means a lot to you, and if you need a friend right now, I can do that, but if it can wait an hour or so, I would be eternally grateful."

"No problem," I said, "go watch the game." I wasn't upset with Robert. Deep down, I knew that if I had told him that it couldn't wait, he would have left Fenway to be there for me right now, but I didn't mean to drag him into this. None of this was his fault.

"You coming?"

"No, I need a breath of fresh air."

"You sure you're okay Davin?"

"Yeah, I'll be back in in a minute." Robert returned to the party and I stepped outside. It was nearly ten o'clock now and the streets were just as empty as they were five hours ago. Feeling alone and dejected, I slumped down on the cold stone that made up the front porch. I was angry, though I took solace in the fact that my anger was well placed. My anger wasn't directed at Maki, or this random guy or the Museum of Modern Art, or the Red Sox. The only person I could be angry with myself. There was no reason I let myself think that the Modern Art job was anything more than needlessly long shot. I should have known that Maki was way too beautiful and awesome to be single as long as I had known her. Taking a few deep breaths, I sat down on the foot of Robert's porch and awaited the predictable cry of the crowd, and the sound of the door opening heralding Robert with the bad news.

But that sound never came. Instead, after about fifteen minutes of quiet, defeatist thought, a loud cheer resonated from within. Almost instantly, the door swung open and Robert, nearly in tears, half yelling said, "Ortiz hit a walk off home run in the 12th. Game Five is later tonight. We're still alive."

As he said those words, people slowly began to filter out of every house on the block, most of them in a state of drunken delirium, celebrating what in that moment seemed to me like a completely inconsequential victory. The Sox were still on the verge of elimination, and had only bought a day of life. But everyone here was celebrating as if they had finally won it all. For a moment though, nothing else mattered, because at the end of the day, Robert was right. "Yeah, I guess we are. We are still alive." §

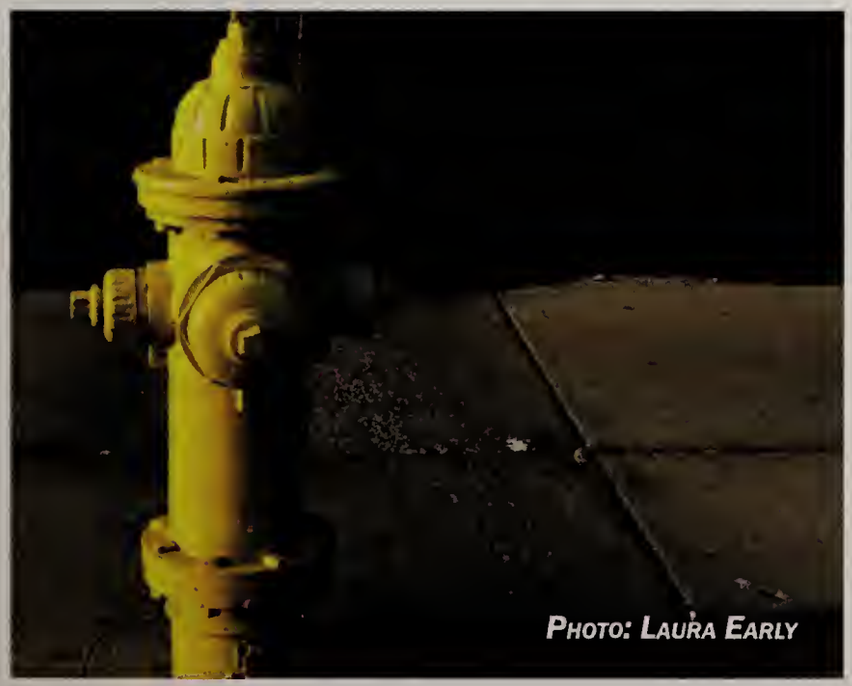


PHOTO: LAURA EARLY

An Honest Day's Work

Robert Barnes

It began with a call. Well, not actually a call, but a text (kids and their technology). It read: "Captain Comet. Roof of the Professional Business Building. Block 97. 11:00 PM. Reply if interested." I replied with my interest, of course. The details were given to me, and two days later here I am on the roof of a downtown skyscraper, my shoulder aching from the weight of the large steel suitcase I've been carrying. Below me, the city's nightlife hustles and bustles with no sign of slowing down as the lights of taxis and limos zip around like strobe lights. Out in the suburbs though, most are calling it a night. In my home, for example, my daughter is already asleep. My son is blaring music through his headphones as he combs The Higher Law's public site for "research" while my wife is sitting in her nightgown, either reading her latest book or playing Sudoku. If you ask her, I'm just out drinking with "The Guys." She may get suspicious and call Joe's house to check on me only to find that I haven't visited him in weeks, but I'll cross that bridge if and when I come to it.

For twenty minutes now, I've been standing on this rooftop in the cold November night, waiting for the curtain on this show to rise. Finally, about two miles away, there's an explosion and flames dance into the air. Debris and rubble fall like rain onto the streets. People scatter in panic while a dozen armed men, robbers, run into the building.

"A 'distraction' will be scheduled to draw him out," my employer had said. "He's always had a thing for bank robberies."

After a few minutes I hear a rush of wind coming from behind me and a streak of golden light streams over me before arcing downward onto the streets, leaving a sparkling dust like glitter in its wake. Captain Comet is on the scene. As he turns and crashes through a window into the bank, I open my suitcase and assemble my kit. I do it without even thinking, the muscle memory having been hardwired into my hands decades ago. Were I a younger man, I would have tried to take him out mid-flight. It would've been a good challenge. But at 50, I'm well aware of my limits, and having been retired for several years, I'm not going to push it.

I think of the day I first told Joe I was "retiring," ten years ago. At the time, he'd already been out of the game for three years, ever since San Francisco. He'd rarely smile after what happened there but I'll never forget that goofy grin he donned when I told him I was out. He was so impressed with me, proud even. Then I think of how he looked when I told him I'd gone back in one more time. He didn't smile. He didn't frown or scold me or do anything. He just stared at me like I was a stranger. In a way, that was worse than anything. I wonder how he'd feel now as, for the fourth time in 10 years, I come out of retirement for "one last job."

Down in the bank, the action has been going on for about three minutes. A small fleet of cop

cars has formed a perimeter around the bank, shutting down the street as muzzle flares and Captain Comet's "stellar blasts" light up the windows. A minute later the flashes die down and, as if on cue, police officers move in on the bank. As they ascend the granite steps to the entrance, Captain Comet casually strolls out of the door as if he wasn't just dodging gunfire five seconds earlier. A crowd has formed just outside the police perimeter and burst into applause as Comet comes into view. Through my scope I can see Comet's face as he waves at his adoring public, flashing that wide, toothy grin of his; the same grin he offered me last time we met face-to-face. Back then we still called him "Kid Comet," for his partnership/apprenticeship/sidekickship with the famous hero, Meteor man. Even after Meteor man was killed and Comet came into his own, it still took a year or two for the world to drop the "Kid" from Comet's moniker. It was during that year or two after his mentor's death that he and I last met.

It was two o'clock in the morning. My family and I were returning to our then home in Indianapolis after a vacation in L.A. It was my bright idea to drive there and back, a four-day journey round-trip in our mini-van, and thusly my responsibility to do said driving. The kids had fallen asleep hours earlier and my wife had finally been lulled to sleep by the metronome sounds of the nighttime highway. I'm not sure when I lost it but the next thing I knew our van had plowed through the concrete barrier and was sailing down toward the streets below the highway overpass. I'd fallen asleep. I'd put my family in danger, killed them. None of us screamed or cried for divine help, my family in too much on shock and I, for my part, too accustomed to death to be afraid. Suddenly, the window went white, a bright light producing a blinding glare on the glass. The van spun around like a top, sending the cups and bags from the Drive-Thrus we'd visited bouncing about the cabin. Then, the spinning slowed and with a slight jerk, we stopped moving and settled on a level plane. The light that had surrounded us dissipated, revealing Comet standing in front of us sporting his best "heroic" pose: feet apart, arms akimbo and that goofy grin splattered across his then-boyish face. After his posing was done, he walked over and opened my door.

"Kid Comet," My wife and I gasped in unison, although her tone was more exclamatory while mine was blatantly accusatory. Thankfully, she yelled louder.

"I prefer 'Captain Comet' or just 'Comet' actually," he said sheepishly, "Are you guys, okay?"

My wife shook her head vigorously without speaking, still in awe of the superhero's presence. Before I could respond, my son ambled out of the back row, over me and presented himself, wide-eyed, before Comet.

"Well, hello," Comet said kindly, "What's your name?"

"Jason,' my son answered quickly, "You caught

us outta the sky! How'd' you do that?"

"Well," Comet paused as he conceived something clever to say. "I farted out a cloud of stardust until it was thick enough that you guys just drifted safely down to the street." I rolled my eyes at the sophomoric joke but it was more than enough for nine-year-old Jason.

"Wow! I want to be just like you when I get big," he exclaimed. Comet smiled warmly.

"You want to fart clouds of stardust?"

My son pondered this for a moment.

"Yes," he decided at last. Comet laughed heartily.

"Okay, little man," he said as he patted Jason's head. "You be good and when you're older and you still want to get in the Hero Business, you look me up, okay?"

Jason nodded in consent.

"Cool," Comet said as he adjusted his aviator goggles and rose off the ground, "Well, you folks take care. Drive carefully." With the last comment he flashed a playful glance in my direction. I was not amused and it showed. At that, he zipped away into the distance at top speed, his golden trail of "pixie dust" chasing after him.

Looking at him now, seven years later, I can see he's hardly changed. Granted, he looks older. He's taller (barely). His jaw is more defined with slight traces of stubble starting to surface. His once messy, neck-length hair has been cut into a shorter, more mature, hipster kind of style. Even his costume has improved, the goofy goggles and aviator jumpsuit he sported in the Old Days dropped for a more superhero-y get-up, complete with gold boots and cape. But underneath it all that, he's still the same overly optimistic Boy Scout he was back when he held onto Meteor man's coattails, rescuing kittens, saving old ladies and catching mini-vans out of the air. He's the same guy that my son idolized, who he still idolizes.

After he met Comet, whenever Jason was asked the famous "What-do-you-want-to-be-when-you-grow-up" question, he would unequivocally answer, "A superhero!" Even now that he's older, instead of begging for a car for his birthday like most kids, he's given me a list of supplies: a wetsuit, mountain climbing gear, etc., that's supposedly for this "hiking" club he's joined in school, but he's not fooling me. I know once he gets his kit, I'll be watching "the newest teen superhero" chasing down bank robbers on the evening news. His mother would freak out if she found out her "baby" is trying to do something so asinine and reckless, but it isn't his age that bothers me. Comet was far younger than Jason is now when he first teamed up with Meteor man. It's the fact that a guy like me raised an aspiring superhero that makes it so ironic. Imagine if Hitler's son became a rabbi. Same principle.

Down on the street, Captain Comet has finished addressing the crowd and has begun to rise from the ground, preparing to take off. This is the moment. Instinctively, I grip the cold steel of my

rifle, inhale sharply and zero my sights on the center of Captain Comet's forehead. My finger tenses against the trigger, ready to pull back at a millisecond's notice. I give in to the tension and the air around me explodes as the gunpowder ignites, pushing the bullet down to meet Comet at twice the speed of sound.

If the guilt for killing a man in cold-blood didn't tear at me, one would think that taking the life of one who'd saved mine would…but it didn't. I've done this too many times for morality to bug me now. What does eat at me is Jason. I think of my future, thirty or so years from now as I lay dying, and how I'll explain my actions to him, how I'll justify killing his favorite hero, his idol, his inspiration.

From the depths of my memory, the voice of my most recent "employer" comes to mind. I'd called him at the last minute in a half-hearted attempt to back out of the job.

"I can't do this. I'm out, retired. Find somebody else," I'd said in a tone that was hardly resolute.

"Oh please," he said, his deep, rough voice drifting like thick smoke though the telephone receiver. "Don't get all moral on me now. This is what you do. This is who you are." Two hours later, I was standing on this rooftop prepared to murder a man.

So Jason, why did I kill him? Because me on this roof, with this rifle in the dark of the night, is who I am. And this: causing a hero's head to evaporate off his shoulders is what I do.

Will I ever change? Probably not, causing other people pain is also what I do. But now that he is gone we must mourn him, and I must now show emotions that I truly do not have. It's been on the news for weeks now, his great memorial and now his funeral. My family and I watch as if we have never seen one before. I've seen plenty and it certainly won't be my last, but I'm sure this will be my last rodeo for now. My son is dead center in front of the television watching so intensely and mumbling something under his voice so that I can't hear exactly what he's saying, I try to block out surrounding noises to hear him. I tell him not to sit so close to the television and to scoot back just a little. My heart stops when I can finally understand what my son has been mumbling all this time. "I swear on my life, Captain Comet, I will avenge you if it's the last thing I do."

I guess this is something I will have to accept now that my son is more determined than ever to be a hero. I will watch him helping his community, getting straight A's, and training to his maximum physical condition all in preparation for the day when he will end my life and find out that I wasn't what he thought I was. But like I said, this, too, is all in a day's work. §

After

Myrna Rodriguez

There was something about the way my brother looked as his canoe started to capsize. A pained look spread where just a few seconds before elation was easily seen flowing across his bright smile. Now his tiny canoe was rushing out of control, heading straight to the rocks, doomed. He was almost crying, panic beginning to take hold of him. I could tell he was getting ready to bolt.

"Don't do it!" I screamed as the look in his eyes switched from panic stricken to pure steely determination. I had seen that look before. He was on a quest and bound to complete it. I ran along the overflowing creek toward him, aiming to stop him, but I was too late. He was already jumping into the water. "No, Thomas!" I yelled again.

"I have to save my man!" he yelled back at me. "He is my most favorite army man! I don't have anymore. He can't drown!"

"You know we can't," I yelled back. "Mom said we can't! The spring runoff is here and we can't risk it. Get out of the water! I will give you my favorite guy. I promise. Please!" I begged, hoping the water wouldn't carry him away and that his clothes weren't too wet. I knew I shouldn't have brought him down here.

Thomas made one more valiant attempt to fish his army man out of the rushing creek waters. He had managed to bring up the tiny capsized canoe but not his man. Giving up, my brother slowly made his way across the current to the shore. I must admit, I was glad he was ok, but afraid to touch his wet body. "Mom's going to be crazy mad about this, Thomas. What am I supposed to say to her?"

"I had to get my army man!" he said, looking from the creek to the sagging paper canoe in his frail hands. The water was dribbling in a steady stream onto his worn, waterlogged tennis shoes.

"Really? Is that what you want me to tell her?" I started walking north along the rocky shore towards the trail, my soggy blue-eyed brother closely behind.

"Well it's the truth!" he countered. "She always tells us to tell the truth. 'There is only bad energy in lying.' That is what she says. I will tell her I had to get my army man. That was important enough to go into the water for!"

"We can't go in the water, Thomas. It's just how it is and you know that. It can make us sick." I sighed heavily. I knew mom would be very upset. It was her most important rule and Thomas knew better than to break it. He was born after. The few kids born after knew to stay out of the water from the time they started crawling, especially during the spring runoff.

It was different now than it was before. I was born before. Thomas only knows what the world is like now, after. He never got to see the things that I did. Sure he's seen the littered remains of that world, sometimes painfully so. We have scrounged

through many abandoned buildings and houses looking for items we can use. It is not pretty when we find bodies, but it is often that we do; some are badly decomposed, others are more recent. We cover them as respectfully as we can and apologize for taking their things, but it's how we've done so well this far.

But Thomas never got to play in the water whenever he wanted to. He also never knew what it was like to stay up after dark. Electricity stopped running through the lines, after. Most were felled many miles away. No one fixed them. No one cared. No one from outside came and those who left never came back. No one knows if they made it or not. We were abandoned a long time ago.

I remember it though, before. It has been around eight winters since it happened. I remember things like television and all the crazy shows my mom liked to watch. I remember the sound of electric guitars screeching through tiny speakers on the desk in my bedroom. I remember having to go to school every day and having lots of neighbors and kids to play with. I remember driving everywhere in cars and sometimes my uncle would even let me ride on his motorcycle.

No gas engines now. The gas ran out a long time ago. The few of us that were left, after, shared the last drops from the town's station over five winters ago. I guess there might still be gas somewhere, but not here. Some might even drive the kind of fancy cars I see abandoned on my journeys. Just like some people might still have electricity and play video games. Maybe they can even play in the water where they live. But we can't.

I brought myself back from my daydream as I walked my brother up the foot-worn path leading through the sparse woods to the road. Once at the road, we started west, into the setting sun. Mom would be worrying about us. We shouldn't be out after dark. Thomas was right when he said we couldn't lie to her. She would know. Mom always knows. Besides, she can smell creek water from 20 yards away.

"Are you still going to give me one of your army men, Alec? I never found mine in the water." Thomas' voice sounded sad, distanced. He tossed his waterlogged canoe into a pile of rubbish on the side of the long-abandoned road.

"Sure I will, Thom. I will give you my most favorite one. Just promise you won't do that again," I said, tucking him under my arm protectively and hugging him as we walked.

"I am sorry, Alec. I know I was bad. I'm sorry. Mom's going to whoop me for getting wet isn't she?" Thomas started to quietly sob.

"She might not. Don't worry so much. There isn't much we can do about it anyway. Just don't do it again and quit crying. Everything is going to be ok."

Thomas sighed, wiped his running nose on his patched flannel shirt and looked at me, a hint of a smile on his small, gaunt face. His eyes reflected a

ray of sunshine that had penetrated the evening's haze. It scared me when I first saw this strange phenomenon but I've now seen it in other kids born after. Sometimes people wander through town. They give us hope that there are other survivors. A few stop to talk and some have young children whose eyes glow when the light hits them a certain way, just like a dog.

"Come on, Thomas. We need to get home quick. It's getting dark." I said, quickening my pace.

"I'll race you, ready, one...two." Without saying three, Thomas bolted into a full run.

"You think you can beat me? My legs are taller than you!" I took off running behind him and caught up to my smaller brother in three quick steps.

We raced down the cracked, uneven road. I was running right next to him, pretending to struggle against him. His face was turning different shades of red as he tried to beat me. We raced down the main road turning left onto Weston Street. Thomas was just a few small steps ahead of me beginning to get winded from his sprint. As we came up to the bend that led to our house, I started to hear strange noises and began to slow down.

"Hey, Thomas, let's stop running. Your big brother is tired." It wasn't true. I could run for miles, but I needed to listen.

Laughing, Thomas stopped and ran back to me. "Since when do you get tired of running?" He sported a big grin which quickly changed to a quizzical look. "Alec, what's that noise? I've never heard anything like that before."

"I don't know, Thom. It sounds like it's coming from by the house."

Thomas backed up closer to me as he turned, looking in the direction of our home, and of our mother. Then I heard voices and what sounded like a truck engine idling.

"We've got to get off the road." I grabbed my brother's arm and pulled him behind an old abandoned house just a few houses down and across the street from ours. I think the Johnsons used to live here.

"Let me go! What's wrong, Alec? What was that noise? Whose voices are those?" My brother looked both scared and excited at the same time. I was scared. I could hear men's voices and I knew there was only one man left alive for miles, Mr. Pratt. These were outsiders and they didn't sound friendly.

"We need to get home, Alec. Maybe those are friends of Mom's. We haven't seen anyone in a really long time. We need to go see. Besides, it will be dark soon, Alec. We need to get inside." Instantly, Thomas nervously scanned the land around our hiding place. "Alec, what was that noise we heard?"

"It sounded like a truck engine." I scanned our surroundings as well. Thomas was right, we needed to get inside. The others would be out soon. I looked around the broken fence panel to see if we were still safe. There wasn't anyone I could see

in the overgrown yard between us and the shed of the house across the street from ours. It was barely standing, but I thought it would be a good place to hide and get a closer look.

"Look over there. See the Taylor's old shed?"

Thomas slid his head around the fence, looked at me, shaking his head in agreement.

"We need to go over there and get inside it. I will go first. Thom, be very quiet and stay really low so they don't see us. You got it? "

"Yeah, I've got it."

"Ok, let's go." I ducked down and began to run across the open space between us and the shed, making sure my brother was close behind and that no one was looking our way. I could still hear voices but they never saw us.

We both crawled into the shed. It was not too sturdy, but enough of the boards were still holding it up to hide us. It was empty. We had pillaged it many winters ago. We crawled to the other side and I looked out a hole in the boards. I could see our house. Thom had his own hole and I could hear his breath turn heavy and fast. He could also see our house.

My mother was kneeling in the middle of the road. She was angry and had been crying. Her favorite blue blouse was torn and covered in red splotches. Her jeans were ripped on her left leg and she didn't have any shoes on. Her long, dark hair was flying wildly in the wind and she had bright red marks covering her face.

Five guys with full white suits surrounded her. One guy had a strange machine and was waving it around her. Three others had very large guns and were pointing them at her as if she was a threat. Yet another was circling around her. He must be the boss.

"She's hot, sir." The man with the strange device said to the boss.

"Listen to me, lady. The people we found down the road said you had kids here and that one was born after. Where is he and who was his father?" The boss hollered at my mother.

"He is gone and so is his father," she quietly replied.

The boss then slapped her across the face, sending her quickly to the ground. "Quit lying, lady. We want the boy!" She looked towards the shed where we were hiding as she wiped a trickle of blood from her lip. For a second I felt like she was looking right at me, like she could see me hiding in that broken down shed. It was like she knew we were hiding there watching these men hurt her. I swear I could see a strange look of relief cross her face.

"Who are they looking for, Alec? Why are they hurting her? Make them stop hurting her, Alec."

"Hush, Thom, we need to stay quiet. They are looking for you. You are the one born after. The Pratt family down the road must have told these guys about you. I can't help her. I need to stay with you and keep you safe. It is what she would want

me to do."

My mother struggled to raise herself into a standing position. She was shaking bad and had blood splattered all over her face. She looked like she was in a lot of pain. Then I watched as she steeled herself and faced the man inside the white suit. "My boy's father is dead. He died soon after he came. Killed by whatever you people did to us. My sons, well, I am happy to inform you that they are gone. They left one day and never came back. I don't know where they are or if they are alive. All I know is that everyone is gone. There's nothing left of my family."

"Is this woman worth anything to us?" a gunman asked, sounding fully annoyed.

"She can't have any more children. She's useless," said another.

"What shall we do with her, Sir?" The largest of the bunch aimed his gun at her as he asked this.

"I am done with her," said the boss, waving his hand and dismissing her.

I held my breath. I knew something bad was going to happen. I grabbed Thom and held him close to me with my hand over his mouth. I watched as the white suit raised his massive weapon and shot my mother in the back of the head. She never saw it coming. Thomas could not stay still. My hand was tight over his face now, holding back his screams as he saw his mother go down, what was left of her head bouncing when it hit the road. I could feel his chest heaving with stifled sobs.

"They don't know we are here. Stay quiet, Thom. They won't find us if we stay quiet. I've got you, bud. It's going to be ok. Just stay quiet, Thomas, please, stay quiet." I begged my brother as I fought to hold back my own heart wrenching sobs.

"We are done here. All these houses are clear. I'm not sure where those kids are, but they won't get far out here alone, especially after dark. Light her up," said the boss. Another suit came from behind the house. He aimed his weapon and pulled the trigger. The flamethrower engulfed my mother's lifeless body, setting it ablaze, the smell of her burning flesh quickly permeating the air.

"Let's go, we have another town to cover tonight." Just as quickly as the white suits killed my mom, they started their trucks, laughing, and began to drive away. I could hear their engines fading, leaving only the crackle of my mother's flames behind to break the silence.

"Stay real quiet and don't look at anything. They are gone and we have to get to the house. The others are probably out and the fire will keep them away, but it won't burn for long." We quickly crawled out of the shed. I scooped my brother off his feet and ran to the edge of the Taylor's house. I stopped for just a second, making sure those men were gone, and then ran past my burning mother into our house.

Setting Thomas down, my emotions took hold of me and I cried. I wanted to be strong but I couldn't. I could hear Thom crying near me, by the

window. He was looking out at her now smoldering body, chest heaving while he wiped away streams of tears from his face.

I could hear the gulp from his throat before he said the words. "Why did they kill her, Alec? Why did she tell them we never came home? Did she think we left her?"

"No, she didn't think that. She knew where we were. She was protecting us. I don't know why they want you."

"What do we do now? Who is going to take care of us, Alec?"

"We have to leave. It isn't safe to stay here anymore. They might come back looking for you." I was trying to sound calm for my brother. We were all we had left. Everyone we had ever known was dead, my father, my brother's father, and now our mother. Being older, and seeing the lost look in my brother's eyes, I knew I needed to stay in control. "I will take care of us now. Mom taught me how."

"Why are they looking for me, Alec? Am I different?" Thomas had a distant, deep tone in his voice.

My brother is different than me. All the kids born after are different, but he is my brother. "You are just fine, Thomas," I said pulling him close. "There is nothing wrong with you. Don't ever think that. Now, we need to try and get some rest. We will leave in the morning." I pulled the curtains closed and sat on the couch holding him in the dark as we both quietly sobbed.

Somehow, curled up in each other's arms, we fell asleep. The next morning I awoke early and rummaged through the house searching for things I thought we would need. I packed what little food we had, a change of clothes, Thomas's favorite blanket, and my remaining three army men. I went into my mother's room and took her blanket.

Thomas was just stirring awake as I came back downstairs. I dropped the bags next to him and went into the kitchen to search for a good container to carry water in. Lifting the false floor in the pantry, I dropped into the crawlspace and uncovered our well. Mom swore this water was safe but I had my doubts. Either way, I tossed the bucket down, fished up some fresh water, and filled up two containers with pretty good lids. As I made my way back into the living room, Thomas had already awoken and was standing by the front window.

"Where did she go?"

I followed his glance out the window and realized mother's body was gone. I had avoided looking when I went upstairs. "The others must have taken her during the night." I shivered at the thought, putting my hand on his bony shoulder. "We can leave out the back."

"I am ready, Alec." Thomas grabbed a bag and slung it over his small shoulders. He looked about the house as if it was his first time here. "Goodbye old house. Take care of momma for me." He slapped his ball cap on his head and made towards the back door. I was close behind. §

The Path

Shelby Wydmon Engelhardt

Kevin looked into the grimy mirror. The motel room he was staying in wasn't the cleanest he had seen, but it had been his home for the last two weeks. He stared at his reflection looking for a sign of wrinkles. At 35 he had a boyish face still. In fact, one of the few ways you could really tell his age was the balding of his black hair. It was a change from the way he once slicked it back with hair gel in his teens in an effort to look cooler than he was.

"They are going to know. They will know I did it," Kevin said as he shifted his thick, black-rimmed glasses. "How can they not know? I am stupid thinking I could get away with stealing the money."

Kevin splashed his face with the cool, clean water from the sink and walked over to the tattered chair and sat slumping forward.

"Now, how do I explain it?" He slid his glasses off and tinkered with them.

"I knew I would never get away. I really should have thought of this before." He sat thinking for a few minutes. He was the kind of guy who brought back the money when the cashier gave him even just a penny over the correct change.

"I will not get caught!" Kevin jumped up and ran back to mirror.

"I am a great liar. I know I can tell the police I wasn't there, I will make something up. Maybe I went to that little cabin for the weekend. I won't get caught." He slid his glasses back on.

"Right? I mean they won't be able to tell I am lying about that. No one knows it's there. Plus, if they did, who would know if I were there that weekend?" Kevin looked at his reflection and slid his glasses off.

"Maybe I should leave these at home."

Kevin stepped out into the bright January sun. It was a stark contrast to the room he was just in. There was snow on the ground, but it was unseasonably warm. There were few cars out and about which was strange for noon on a Monday, but he needed to concentrate on his story so he was happy there were few distractions. He walked the two blocks to the small, red brick building. Corwin City Police Department. "Here goes nothing," he muttered as he walked inside the glass doors.

He stepped up to the desk in the front. A young girl looked up from the computer she was typing on.

"Can I help you," she asked politely.

"I am here to see an Officer Jamieson," Kevin replied.

"I will get him for you, please have a seat."

Kevin sat down, trying his hardest to remain calm. He had never been in trouble before. Even all through school, he had never had as much as a detention. And here he sat in a police station for a crime he was guilty for. What was I thinking? He had no reason to steal that money. He had a good job working for Alexandria Industries as an ac-

countant.

It was the week before Christmas. Kevin walked in to the quaint little house Cara insisted on purchasing right after they were married. Usually the house was filled with the joyous sound of seasonal music, but today all he heard was Cara giggling from their bedroom. He sat down his briefcase and slid off his jacket on his way to find her. That's when he saw it. There sat Cara on the lap of another man. Kevin recognized him from school. Aaron was always fighting or suspended for something against the rules. He didn't even graduate. Cara looked up, shocked to see Kevin standing there.

"What's going on," Kevin looked confused.

"Kevin, I am leaving to be with Aaron," Cara stated coldly as she turned back to Aaron.

"Out, get out of my house," Kevin managed to yell between his tears. After five years of marriage, he couldn't believe Cara was leaving him for Aaron. He wanted to show Cara he had a bad side too. This is where that path had led him.

"Officer Jamieson will be right out," the girl announced. Kevin could feel his heart start beating faster. He breathed deeply and exhaled through pursed lips. Gotta stay calm Kev. You have this in the bag. The door behind the desk opened.

"Thanks for comin' down Mr. Greer. I am Officer Jamieson," the police officer said as he extended his hand. Officer Jamieson was in his early 40s, and clearly Irish by the look of his light skin and red hair. Kevin shook his hand and followed him to the back of the building past the small, empty holding cell. Keep your senses so you don't end up there.

The police officer led him into a small brick room. It wasn't very welcoming, much like Kevin had seen in many of the crime movies he watched. It smelled damp and stale and the light was dim. "Would ya like a cup of coffee?"

"Um, sure, I will take a cup," Kevin answered as he sat in the chair. Officer Jamieson left the room to get him a cup. Kevin stood, walking around the room. Stay cool Kev. Stay cool. Keep it together, you can do this. They will never find out. Kevin sat back down.

The door to the small room opened. "Here ya go Kevin. It's ok if I call ya that right?"

"Yeah, no reason to be formal."

"Good. So Kevin, I am sure ya know why I had to call ya down here. Some money was taken from the office ya work in and ya had the easiest access to it."

Kevin shifted in his chair. "I…I dunno anything about the money."

"Really? I mean according to the schedule ya weren't workin' but Kevin, we both know ya could have been there."

"I wasn't there. I was at a cabin up north. I spent the weekend there. My wife had just told me she was leaving me and I…I…uh…I needed to get away."

There was a knock at the door. Officer Jamie-

son walked over and opened it. "There is a call for you on line four, sir," the young girl from the front told him.

"I'll be right back Kevin. We will get to the bottom of this then," he said as he shut the door.

Kevin breathed a huge sigh of relief. He stood up and paced the room. Kevin, just tell them. Maybe they will let you off lighter if you do. No, no, no…they won't let you off. Just stick to the cabin Kev. He was standing at the end of the table when Officer Jamieson returned.

"Sorry, that was my son Noah, had to take the call."

"No apologies needed." Kevin sat down.

"So, where were we? The money was taken on December 27th. And ya say ya were at a cabin. Ya wife said ya were at home."

"I was at the cabin. All weekend." Kevin stared at the wall in front of him.

Damn her! I didn't think about her running her mouth about me being with her and at home. I have thought of every possibility except that one. Of course I was with her, I wanted to brag to her about taking the money and let her spend it, Kevin thought to himself. He shifted in his chair again and sat staring at the wall of the damp smelling, dimly lit room.

"Mr. Greer, I will ask ya again. Where were ya on December 27th?" Officer Jamieson was standing over Kevin. Although very Irish, Officer Jamieson towered over most men and tipped the scales at 375, which was mostly muscle. He had a way of making almost anyone tell everything. Kevin opened his mouth. He tried to speak, but nothing would come out. He looked down and stared at the coffee cup in front of him. It was unremarkable coffee, the kind you would find in any office around the country, but Kevin savored it. The officer stood up, straightened his uniform and walked behind him.

"Look, Kevin, we both know that ya were the one who took the money. Just tell me so we can move on. Maybe ya think I am stupid, but Kevin, ya are wrong. I know everything."

Kevin shifted in his chair. He could feel the weight of the truth like a load of bricks on his shoulders. Sweat started forming on his forehead. He shifted again and started to fiddle with his cup.

"Kevin, one more time. Where were ya at on December 27th?"

Kevin looked back up at the wall. He was glad there was no mirror in this room and extremely glad he had decided to leave his glasses at that grimy motel. The officer slammed his hands on the table, truly upset that he wasn't able to break this guy. Jamieson knew Kevin was guilty, but without proof or a confession, his hunch was invalid.

"Ok, ya wanna play games Kevin? I am done playing. Stare at the wall all ya want. Take all the damn time ya want. I am here for seven more hours. I will be happy to wait."

Kevin stared ahead still. The officer walked to the door and opened it. "I will be back. Maybe

ya will talk then," he said as he slammed the door behind him. Kevin sat with his head in his hands. He closed his eyes.

There's the money. All $10,000. All I have to do is take it. Kevin quickly put the money in his bag while looking around. Good. Everyone is gone for the day. I will take the money and head home. I will give it to Cara. Surely, she will know I am bad then. He can't have ever stolen this much money. I will keep her. Kevin headed for the door. He locked it behind him. Stay cool, Kev. Walk at your usual pace. Keep your head down and get home. Kevin's heart was like a thundering herd of horses as he walked his usual path. Home. He was there. He opened the door and stepped inside.

"Kevin, are ya ready to talk," Officer Jamieson startled him back to reality.

"Um, I have told you everything. Now, if you aren't charging me with anything, I would like to leave."

"Ya are free to leave whenever Kevin."

"Good." Kevin stood and pushed in his chair. "It was nice meeting you Officer Jamieson."

"Yeah, I am sure we will meet again."

Kevin walked back out of the police station. You did it Kev! You made it out of there without them knowing. They will never get you now! You are the best liar you know! Kevin smiled to himself as he walked back to the motel. As he walked, he looked down at the puddles being formed by the melting snow. The crisp, white snow that had covered the sidewalks and roads a few days earlier was slowly turning into dirty, mucky puddles. Kevin stared at his reflection in one as he continued on his walk.

He opened the door to his room and walked over to the mirror. No cleaner than it was earlier in the day, Kevin washed his face as he stared at his reflection looking back at him. I can't believe you pulled this off, he thought as he slid his glasses back on. He walked over to the bed and lay down staring at the ceiling.

There stood Cara welcoming him home with a big smile. The house smelled wonderful, like she had been baking all day. Kevin took a deep breath to take it all in. It was what they needed, a fresh start.

BANG BANG BANG! Kevin woke with a start, confused as to where he was. He sat on the bed for a minute before realizing that he was still in that dirty, old motel.

"Police! Open the door!"

Kevin walked over to the door and looked out of the peep hole. There stood Officer Jamieson and a few other random officers.

"Mr. Greer, open the door," Officer Jamieson yelled.

Kevin opened the door. "Kevin Greer, ya are under arrest for stealing money from Alexandria Industries."

Officer Jamieson grabbed Kevin and handcuffed him. He led him to the waiting police car.

"Ya boss, Mrs. Maloney, turned over a surveillance video Kevin. We have it all on tape."

"And, boys, that's how I ended up here," Kevin told the two heavily tattooed men sitting across from him.

"Lunch is over. All inmates up," one of the guards commanded. Kevin pushed in his chair and stood. He matched all of the other inmates in his orange jumpsuit. They all filed out in a single file.

As they passed the cells one by one the line got shorter. Kevin stood in front of his cell. He sighed and walked in. SLAM. The door closed behind him. He walked over to the block wall. He took his glasses off and washed his face with the cold water. He slid his glasses back on and looked at his reflection in the spotless mirror. §

Photo: Tom Roach

They'd Never Believe You Anyways

Patricia Newenhouse

You hear the leaves crunch a little too loud as the birds' chirps fade. The dribble of the creek seems to disappear with the wind as you refuse to exhale. A snap bounces off the trees. Maybe it's the deer, you think at first. No. It's footsteps. And not the careful ones of others like you, the kind that just float along the leaf topped dirt. And they're not the crunch-stomps of the runners, not the scamper of the dog walkers. No. It's the thud-whack of the inexperienced hunters as they break innocent sticks. You look at Johnny.

"Don't run," Johnny says as he brings his arm in front of you to keep you from jumping off the half-fallen log. Johnny always tells stories about sneaking past the cops or getting out of tickets, which comes as quite a surprise. Not that he'd tell the stories, but that they're actually true. With his in-his-face blonde hair and Bob Marley t-shirts, he just screams arrest me.

Beside you, Melby places her hands against the rotting wood and slowly lowers herself onto the ground. You mimic her movements, confident in her experience as well. She has the face of a twelve year old, with big, pleading eyes and tiny dimples that jump around her face when she laughs. But, her brother's five-pointed-crown tattoo keeps people's eyes on her.

"What the hell are we supposed to do?" you ask, trying to hide your first time nerves. Cops love you. They have no reason not to.

Johnny steps toward a thick patch of green, a part of the forest you've never explored before. With a nod, he continues on into a bunch of weird plants. You let out a low moan as a thorn pierces its way through your jeans. Melby stares at you with her puppy-dog eyes all pit-bulled up. As far as you know, Melby has never fought anyone before, but her tiny frame looks like she wants to tear up your hoodie and transfer its red to your chest.

Normally you'd be at work, answering phones and Dewey Decimaling a huge lump of returned books. But Lindsey needed you to work her Friday, so you guys switched. When Melby called you this morning you tried to tell her that you didn't want to. Billy had one of his bonfires last night and the forest was going to be filled with hung-over jocks and shameful sluts. But your father was driving you crazy, so you went anyways.

Johnny picked you up in his Camaro. The red beast glistened as the fall sun beat down on its polished hood. Hopping into the passenger seat, you noticed Melby spread across the back. Her bare feet wiggled out the window as she held Pride and Prejudice.

"For class," you asked.

"For fun," Melby said without averting her eyes.

You come to a clearing behind a row of maple trees, with berry bushes filling in the gaps. On your right, the creek swishes. Melby squeezes a pack of squares out of her pocket and pops one in her mouth. You and you Johnny each grab one when she offers. You all stand, hands in pockets, facing the gurgling water. Something's wrong. You can feel it. The forest's vibe is just off. The wind shifts, sending your smoke away from the creek back into the bushy path you just escaped. The twang of a snapping twig makes Johnny jump. He throws his unfinished Marlboro into the murky waters. Melby and you follow.

"Bout ten more minutes 'til we run into the bike path," Johnny says as he glides through a path of prickly plants at the edge of the clearing.

You've always loved coming to the forest. The gentle swish of the muddy creek coos you to sleep as you lay on your favorite fallen log. Once in a while, a stream of sunlight sneaks through the branches and cuddles up around you like a warm blanket. Today, the creek's rushing waters cry a warning of abnormality. Your fallen log is no longer a place where you can daydream about ten tier sandwiches, robotic pets and your future. Your sacred dwelling has been violated by men who are paid to keep you safe. They'll notice the homemade paths, the worn-in groves, and patrol the area from now on. You'll have to find a new place to listen to the birds' music. You'll never be able to dangle your legs over the creek's ledge and throw away your anger toward your father, making big splashes with the smallest of rocks. Sneaking into the fragrant foliage as red and orange streak the sky will become a mere memory. And every fumbled footstep will make you contort your limbs searching for unwelcome eyes. The sun's powerful rays will stop comforting your cold soul. And just stir your already bubbling tummy.

"You hear that," you ask.

Melby and Johnny both steady themselves and crouch next to a big oak. You stop too, and hug your shoes beside one of the dark thorny monsters. Melby nods, biting her stained lips. A high-pitched bark resonates within the trees. You feel as if the leaves are crawling off the dirt and wrapping themselves around your ankles. It sounds again, louder this time. You can't move. Crunch, crunch, snap. The air in your lungs won't come out and your tongue thickens with a need for water. A beam of artificial light breaks through the tightly packed branches. Shit.

Your stomach clenches. Your breath quickens. On all fours, Johnny starts to maneuver himself deeper into the painful greenery. The bike path lays about twenty feet away, on the other side of this huge block of pointy bushes. Melby scoots along, careful to not break the tiny twigs that cover the dirt. If you can make it to the path, you can make it to 159th, a street filled with neighborhood alleys

and backyards of friends that you might be able to hide in. Not sure what to do, you drop to your knees, dragging them through what's left of the grass.

Johnny pulled his Camaro up to the curb around noon. You guys jumped out and trudged your way through the tall grass that bordered your favorite entrance. You made a right at the twisted tree and jumped over the ancient roots that bubbled out of the sparse grass. Billy's makeshift fire pit bore into the dirt a few yards to the right of the turn. To get to your spot, you guys tip-toed across the garbage-picked boards that bridge the creek. A few minutes into the clearing a great oak sprawls across the land. The fallen giant makes the best seat, and provides the best view.

A bush stirs, causing the branches to wobble. Melby stands, her palms caked, her shoes studded with thorns. Static buzzes from the wiggling plant. Johnny, who is a few feet ahead of you and Melby, positions himself as if he were about to run a race. You hold your breath. His eyes bounce from you to Melby, then back to you. Panting rings in your ears. Johnny nods. And runs.

You and Melby hopped onto the fallen giant, the creek squirming in front of you. Johnny dug in his sweatshirt for his lighter. He pulled it out, shook it. You threw him the Swisher you had in your hoodie pocket, careful not to fall off the log as you rocked to gain momentum. Your throw was short, like always, and Johnny grabbed the cigar out of the air like a badass. After popping the blueberry flavored wrapper into his mouth, Johnny sat on the rock near the water. Melby cleared her throat and then tossed Johnny her pink razorblade.

Johnny runs straight into the thorns. Melby takes a sharp right, so you kick up some dirt and go left. The barking tears through your ears. Even though it's early afternoon, you can see the glare of a flashlight bounce off of the dark plants that surround you. Sweat drips, plastering your hair to your forehead.

Johnny cradled the Swisher, sliced it neatly down the middle, and tossed the tobacco into the creek. He pulled out a small baggie. You and Melby complained about your alcoholic father and her incompetent brother as Johnny focused on marrying the pungent green from the baggy with the lovely blueberry wrapper. After a few minutes, he held up the pearled product. He popped off of his rock and joined you on the wood.

I should've seen the bike path by now, you think. It isn't supposed to be that far away. Thorny monsters stand behind you, and berry bushes lie ahead. Your jeans are sprinkled with bloody pokes and your hoodie has a hole in the elbow.

Johnny's lips hugged his creation as he brought the lighter to its end. He handed it off to you next. You placed the roasting creature in your mouth and slowly inhaled. Smoke built up in your throat. You pushed the dense air into your lungs and slipped the brown device into Melby's hand.

The barks seem to be quieter now. You stomp down a little clearing and sit cross-legged on the cool earth.

After about half a minute, you released what was left of the smoke into the crisp air. Your head started to feel lighter and your headache began to clear. Johnny started to describe his dream home. You and Melby chimed in, each creating a safe abode that would feel like heaven.

Sirens scream, so loud that you throw your hands over your ears. You turn onto your side, blades of grass sticking to your cheek.

You guys talked about your fantasy homes, dream lives, and perfect jobs. You laid your body across the log as Melby swung her legs off the side. Johnny sat with his back against the wood, and drew in the dirt and chewed on blades of grass. You talked about how everyone says what you're doing is so bad. That people think that anyone who does this shit will end up in jail or dead. They don't think you can work thirty hours a week and keep on the honor roll like Johnny does. In their eyes, getting a scholarship to Cornell like Melby did would be impossible. And of course they wouldn't even consider a person like that to be their high school's valedictorian like you're going to be.

A heavy shade of black swallows the forest. Your phone is the only light besides the moon. You have a new text, and seven missed calls. The calls are from your father, probably wondering where his dinner is. The text is from Melby: Johnny ditched the green b4 they met up wit us. got off but not w/o some bs. u best b free 2

You guys continued to pass around the blunt and lose yourselves in a better world. When the first one evaporated Johnny leaned back and lit another. And then Melby sparked another after that as you guys laughed so hard. And you rolled the next one as all your laughter turned into tears and then laughter again. And then you all sat back and watched the clouds float by and listened to the forest's sweet melody. And then the animals hushed and the sky stood still and you heard some leaves crunch just a little too loud. §

Rainbow Dash Saves the Day

Zachary Tincher

"I'll save you, Lily Blossom!" yells Rainbow Dash, the blue Pegasus.

"Heeeeelp!"

Lily Blossom, the purple pegasus with a golden flowing mane, is trapped inside the doggy cage with Ruffles, the big bad dragon, and Rainbow Dash is going to save her. Rainbow dash flies through the air and does flips and awesome zigzags because she is way past cool.

"I'm here, Lily Blo-"

"When are you coming home?" comes a shout from the kitchen. "Julie needs you here too!"

"I'm here, Lily Blossom! Ruffles, you let her go!"

"Ruff ruff," roars the dragon.

Rainbow Dash uses her super speed to break through the cage, and the smelly, meany dragon steps out of his lair with his tongue hanging out, wagging his tail. Rainbow Dash jumps high on his back, trying to get him away from her friend.

"Over here, bad breath!"

"You…what, call…lawyer. I…fighting…custody…daughter…" A few seconds later something in the kitchen makes a loud noise, making Ruffles the scary dragon scamper away with his ears low and his tail between his legs.

"Ha ha, take that, you stinky dragon," calls Rainbow Dash to Ruffles with a gigantic smirk.

Lily Blossom tiredly steps from the lair. "Yay Rainbow Dash, you saved me!" she shouts as she runs to hug her friend.

"It's no problem, Lily. That was soooo cool!"

Daddy slowly walks from the kitchen and plops on the couch.

"Hi, Daddy! Rainbow Dash just saved Lily Blossom from Ruffles."

Daddy smiles. "Hey baby, that's awesome. Lily Blossom is lucky to have a good friend like Rainbow Dash." I smile back at him and pick up my pony friends.

"Come on, Lily Blosssom, let's fly to our friends and have some fun," calls Rainbow Dash, but before she can kick off the ground, Daddy makes a noise behind me.

I turn around and Daddy's face is hiding behind his hands. He starts to cry, but stops for a little bit, but then cries again.

"Oh no, Rainbow Dash, someone else needs your help."

"Never fear, Julie's dad! I'll save you!" Rainbow Dash leaps off the ground and soars into the air to Daddy, her rainbow mane flowing down her back as she breaks the color barrier! In a second she lands on his knee and Daddy stops shaking.

"Daddy, Rainbow Dash is here to save you this time." Taking his face out of his hands, Daddy wipes his eyes and sniffs his nose.

"Oh hey there Rainbow Dash," he smiles. "Thanks for coming to save me and cheer me up.

You sure are a great friend."

"No problem, Julie's dad! All in a day's work."

With his great, big arms, Daddy picks me and Rainbow Dash up and gives me a hug.

"Daddy, is Mommy gonna be back from vacation soon? She needs to see the awesome hero, Rainbow Dash, and her friend Lily."

Daddy looks at me for a long time and kisses my forehead and gives me another big hug. "Yes, sweetie, Mommie will be back soon. Now quick! I think Rainbow Dash's friend Applejack needs some help too!"

"Alright, Lily Blossom," shouts Rainbow Dash, "let's go help our friends!" §

PHOTO: BEATA POZDZAL

Lucy

Jamie Barr

Today was the moment of truth. I was nervous as I adjusted the children's drawings on the bulletin board. After today I would learn my fate. Either I would be happy for the next six months or I would be driven to an early grave. The decision would be made by the school principal, Mrs. Gallagher, who would be observing my kindergarten class today. Mrs. Gallagher found it hard to believe that a kindergartener could be truly evil. During my twenty years of teaching, I used to agree with her, until I met Lucy. This child was…different.

It was a week before Halloween and Lucy was definitely in her element. I seriously considered going to the school's pastor and asking him to perform an exorcism. I feel that she was the devil possessing the body of a child. I looked around the classroom and took great pride in what I saw. The room was littered with decorations. They put the children in the Halloween mood without scaring them. It was Lucy's job to scare them and she took it very seriously.

All of the corners were strewn with thick cobwebs and from these cobwebs dangled glittery, black spiders. The glitter on them made them seem friendly rather than intimidating. Bats hung from the ceiling attached to fishing wire. This allowed them the freedom to gently flutter when a breeze came through the windows and gave them a more realistic appearance. Black cats were also scattered around the room. I have never been superstitious, but since Lucy has been in my class, I firmly believe that black cats are bad luck. Finally, my favorite Halloween decoration was a five foot witch that I named Glenda. Glenda wore a pointy, black hat and a long glistening black dress. She had a pale orange face and carried an orange and black basket. Her hair was wild, frizzy and neon orange in color. This hair was also home to a dozen plastic spiders.

If the children were well behaved, I would fill her basket with treats. When they were more rowdy, the basket would be empty. The children would walk by the basket and peek in to see what kind of day they were having. When Lucy walked by the basket and saw it was empty she gave Glenda a punch in the stomach. I had to remind Lucy that Glenda would not give treats to someone that hurt her and she needed to be nice to Glenda.

The children, as well as Mrs. Gallagher, loudly started filing into the classroom and taking their seats. I had twenty eight students this year, so the desks were arranged in seven clusters of four seats. This allowed the children to communicate and get to know the other children in their group, so everyone would have at least one good friend throughout the year. Suddenly, Lucy walked in and the room became quiet. Her personality was at odds with her appearance. The girl was nasty and cunning, yet she had the face of an angel. Lucy was five inches shorter than my five feet seven inch height. She was

a chubby girl with perfectly round cheeks that gave her a cherubic expression. She had large brown doe eyes that she did not hesitate to bat if she thought they would keep her out of trouble. She had a heart shaped mouth and always wore her waist length, black hair in pig tails.

I suspected that Lucy was much older than five, but I could not prove it. She was larger in height and weight than any of the other students and she had a full set of adult teeth. Her parents had never produced her birth certificate and she swore up and down that she was indeed five. I just prayed daily that I would never have to restrain her. I suspected that she could and would beat me up and my only prayer of winning that battle would be to sit on her.

Class had officially begun, so I started the day with Mrs. Gallagher's intense gaze on my face and the children looking up at me expectantly. Since this was a Catholic school, I began each day with a prayer from the children's prayer books I kept in my desk. I got up and began to pass each book out. When each child had a book, I sat back down at my desk.

"Miz Greco, I didn't get a prayer book," Lucy said sweetly with her hand raised. I got up, looked around her desk and could not find one anywhere.

"Did anyone get an extra prayer book?" I asked my class as I scanned the room to see if anyone had.

The class responded in unison with a "No, Mrs. Greco."

I knew I had exactly enough books so that each child could have their own. Just as I was about to suggest that Lucy share with someone I heard a loud hissing noise from the corner of the room. I looked up to see my teaching aid motioning frantically to the garbage can. Inside the garbage can was Lucy's prayer book.

My aid whispered in my ear, "She's the anti-Christ."

"Lucy, please come here and get your prayer book." I was trying not to let my anger show but my I could feel my blood pressure rising.

"No!" Lucy bellowed. She began throwing quite the tantrum. She stomped her feet and started screaming.

"That's ok, Lucy. You don't have to join us in prayer." I had to make the piercing screams stop so I could plot my next move in this battle of wits.

Lucy immediately settled down and a grin of victory spread over her pretty features.

"You can just pray with me later during recess. I would love the company."

Lucy's smile turned into a glare as she stomped her way over to the garbage can to get her book. I looked at Mrs. Gallagher's reaction to see if the sacrilege was enough to have the child removed from my class, but she seemed unimpressed. I took a deep breath and continued with a math lesson.

. . .

I had a flashback to the first math lesson of the

year. Lucy was fidgeting in her chair. I knew she had to use the bathroom but she was not asking to go.

"Lucy, do you need to go to the bathroom?"

"No, Mrs. Greco."

"Are you sure you don't need to go?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"I think you should go anyway. Go to the bathroom and try."

Lucy grudgingly got up and went to the bathroom. She was back five seconds later.

"I want you to try to use the bathroom for a full minute, Lucy."

Lucy trotted back off and came back two minutes later. I started to feel anxious about what she was up to.

"Did you use the bathroom, Lucy?"

A malicious grin spread across Lucy's face and she squatted down in front of me and defecated in her pants. My first instinct was to stick her nose in it like a bad puppy. That kind of behavior is unacceptable for a kindergarten teacher though, so I had to call her parents and clean up her mess.

. . .

Back in the present, math class went by without incident and it was time for recess. I would not be supervising the children during recess today. That would be Mrs. Gallagher's job. I would receive a nice half hour break for this recess. As the children were heading outside, Lucy plowed through the group knocking children down and slamming them against walls in her effort to be the first one outside. Mrs. Gallagher did not say anything as she helped children back to their feet and made sure no one was injured. I called Lucy out of line and told her I had to speak with her. I told her she had a choice, since I always believe in giving children a choice. I informed her that she could either be last in line or she could spend recess with me. Lucy chose to be last in line.

My first stop was a bathroom break. I checked my reflection in the mirror and admired my hair. A week ago it was half gray and half brown. I told my daughter I was not going to do anything about the gray hairs and would just go gray gracefully. She told me I could either be gray or brown but I had to pick one. She then dragged me to the salon the next day. My hair is now completely brown with silver highlights running through it. It is amazing how gray hair can be used as highlights and not even look gray anymore. A wave of panic interrupted my musings, over my children being supervised by a principal unaware of Lucy's true nature, so I ran back to my classroom to supervise through the window.

. . .

The reason Mrs. Gallagher agreed to come today was because yesterday at recess Lucy tried to poison her classmate, Eve. Mrs. Gallagher finally thought there might be some merit to my complaints. Yesterday I saw Lucy hiding something behind her back. I did not know what it was, but I

noticed that it was bright blue. I watched Lucy walk up to the Eve, the prettiest girl in class, and hand her the vial. Eve had blonde curly hair, bright blue eyes and lips like Angelina Jolie. Lucy was mean to her, but I never thought she would try to hurt her. I ran to the two girls and snatched the vibrant blue vial from Eve's tiny hands.

"Lucy, what is this?" I asked her.

"It's a special drink I made for Eve," She responded with a grin.

"What's in this vial, Lucy?" I asked her again but she simply ignored me. It was time to try another tactic.

"You know, my son is a police officer and I will have him analyze this liquid and tell me exactly what is in it." When all else fails always, there's always intimidation.

Lucy knew when she had lost a battle of wills. "It's some stuff I put together from under the kitchen sink. One of the bottles is what my mom uses to fix the sink."

"YOU PUT DRANO IN THIS DRINK AND TRIED TO GET EVE TO DRINK IT? YOU COULD HAVE KILLED HER! GO TO THE PRINCIPALS OFFICE RIGHT NOW!" I knew I was yelling like a crazy woman but I could not help myself. Eve's mouth, throat and stomach could have been burned or severely damaged from drinking this. Then I began to play the "what if" game. What if I was helping another child? What if I had not been watching Lucy? What if I had been looking somewhere else instead of at this child at this particular moment? The day would have had a tragic ending.

"Better yet, I'm going to hold your hand the whole way there to make sure you get there safely." I wanted to make sure she did not torture any other kids on the way to the office or simply not go there at all. I marched her to the office. My principal saw the angst on my face and kept Lucy in an in-house suspension for the rest of the day, which was a relief to me. I just could not deal with that little attempted murderess anymore today.

. . .

I came back to the present when the children came running in the classroom excited from their time outside. Once they settled down, I read them the story Bubbly Brown Bear. After I read the story, I passed out a picture of a bear for them to color and gave each child a box of crayons. Ten minutes later, the children were finishing up and I would soon be collecting their pictures to hang up on the bulletin board. When I walked passed Lucy's desk, I noticed her picture was not colored.

"Lucy, why isn't your picture started. I'm going to collect them pretty soon and I can't hang up a picture that has not been colored."

"Duh, Miz Greco. It's a polar bear. Polar bears are white, so I don't need to color it."

"But I asked you to color a picture of the bubbly BROWN bear. Not a polar bear. Now, what color do you think a bubbly BROWN bear should

be?" I made sure to emphasize the color when I spoke so there would be no confusion.

Mrs. Gallagher was staring at us like she was watching the best soap opera ever, and I noticed the corners of her mouth starting to twist up in what could have been a smile on most people. Since she rarely smiled it appeared to resemble more of a grimace. She still made no move to get up or assist me in getting Lucy to do as she was told. Lucy picked up the brown crayon, broke it in half and proceeded to eat it. She could no longer color the bubbly brown bear with a crayon so I gave her a brown marker. It is much more difficult to eat a marker than a crayon. Lucy began to color.

For the last hour of the day, I make the children go to learning centers. These centers are hands on manipulative to further allow the child to interact with their environments. Some of the centers are: a writing center, a Lego center, a language arts center, a math center and a puzzle/game center. The Lego and board game centers are sandwiched between the writing and math centers to give the children breaks between the centers that actually required them to tax their little brains. Lucy bowled the children over to get to the Lego center and was promptly placed in the writing center.

After the first fifteen minutes I told the children it was time to switch centers. Of course, Lucy was upset with me so she refused to move to the next center. We had this problem every week but after I embarrassed her in front of the class, I could usually get her to switch with minimal trouble.

. . .

A month ago, it was time for Lucy to switch centers. When I told her she had to go, she threw herself on the ground. This tactic worked for her mother because she is ninety pounds soaking wet and Lucy is over a hundred pounds. There is no way that Lucy's mom could possibly pick her up. I had thirty pounds on Lucy, so I was not going to let it work on me, otherwise she would have the upper hand and I'd never get her to do anything. I picked her up under her arms and dragged her to the next center. The look of shock and horror on her face was priceless. She felt like a ton of bricks as I heaved her to the next station.

I felt something tear after I had lifted her and I was unsure whether I had a hernia or my uterus had fallen out. When I got home, my husband and all four of my children were waiting by the door. Since Lucy had been in my class, my children rushed over to see what she had done that day. The more haggard I looked, the more excited everyone was. When they saw me hunched over in my walk to the front door, I could see the excitement on the faces of my entire family. I swear I lived in an insane asylum sometimes.

. . .

Back in the present, I bent over so Lucy and I were eye to eye. "Do I need to carry you to the next center like I did last time?" I was praying she would say no like she normally did so I would not

hurt myself again.

But Lucy did not say a word. My mistake was squatting down so my balance was unsteady. Suddenly, I tasted blood and had a searing pain on my face as my head jerked back, I flew backwards and skidded on my derriere. The children were screaming and all came running to my aid. I looked at her, stunned. She had just kicked me in the mouth. It was fortunate that I had my hands clasped behind my back when I went to talk to her, otherwise I would be choking her right now.

Mrs. Gallagher finally got up and decided to intervene and put me out of my misery. She leaned over and asked "Why did you kick Mrs. Greco in the face?"

Lucy responded by punching her in the eye. Mrs. Gallagher had made the same mistake I did. She let herself get too close to Lucy. Apparently, she thought since she was the principal, she was immune to Lucy's abuse. In Lucy's world, no one was exempt from her abuse. What an ignorant woman.

"You are officially expelled from this school! I am calling your parents right now to come and get YOU!" Mrs. Gallagher had one hand covering her eye and the other hand was shaking in Lucy's face as she tried to maintain some semblance of authority.

. . .

Mrs. Gallagher and I watched the car that was taking the devil child out of our lives forever, drive away. My lip was swollen and bleeding. My bite would never be the same so I would always have a reminder of little Lucy. Mrs. Gallagher's eye was bloodshot and the delicate skin underneath it was already turning a dark purplish, blue. We probably looked like victims of abusive husbands or a car accident. My family was going to be sad when I got home today to tell them the Lucy stories were coming to an abrupt end.

"My eye burns like an egg frying on the desert sand," Mrs. Gallagher said.

"This was a wonderful day," I said with a painful grin. §

Darkest Night

Nicole Massie

I sat in the darkness waiting on the stairs on the wings of the stage. I was excited because this was closing night and I was going to see my mom and dad. They left for vacation about a week ago and missed every performance, but promised to make it back in time for the last. They never missed closing night. My poor parents have suffered to sit through every single show that I have been in, and each closing performance they are both there with a bouquet of roses in hand to offer me at the end of final bows. It was something that I had grown accustomed too, a tradition that I was looking forward too. And there I was waiting nervously backstage for the last number to begin before intermission so I could run out into the crowd afterwards to look for my parents who had missed the first half of the show. And I was angry.

Sure, my mom had made it to every practice of the show before she left but still, I did not want her to miss the final show. How could she? They had both made a promise to be there roses in hand to congratulate me on another great performance. My parents did not break promises when they were important ones, especially not to me. I was their favorite after all. It wasn't a secret. So when they told me they'd make it I had no doubt in my mind they would. I had just spoken to my mom a few hours ago and she said they were only three hours away from home by Indianapolis. Even with traffic they should have been here by now.

The lights went down on us and the director made the announcement.

"We will now take a brief fifteen minute intermission. Please stop by our concession stand and return to your seats when the lights flash. Thank you."

With that I didn't hesitate. I raced down the newly painted wooden stairs off the stage and into the crowd of people. If my parents weren't here, at least someone will be for me. My husband at the very least should be here. It was such a hot muggy August night. Even though it was after eight you could still feel the humidity in the air. The people all around me smelled of sweat and grass from sitting in lawn chairs to watch the show. Little kids were running around everywhere trying to get to the playground. The sky was so clear you could see every star, which is a rarity in northwest Indiana. I tried to run around not looking obvious but was beginning to become more and more upset the more places that I looked for a familiar face in. Amongst all the faces in the crowd of over three hundred, not one face was here for me. Not even my husband.

I took off in the direction of the huge blue cast tent that was set up for us. My purse had my cellphone in it. Maybe someone had called. Maybe my mom called to tell me they were running late. I grabbed my purse and ran outside behind the big

oak tree on the edge of the park. This was my spot where I liked to have a smoke when I wasn't needed on stage or needed to help out with the sets. I lit up a cigarette took a deep drag and then opened my phone. I didn't have any missed calls, voicemails, text messages, nothing. It was as if everyone had forgotten about me. I called everyone I could think of, my sisters, brother, grandparents, even my mom's best friend, but got no answer from anyone. I left messages and text messages still without reply. I began to get this eerie feeling that something was wrong so I called the last person I would ever call. My grandmother, whom I'm secretly not that fond of, answered.

"No, I haven't heard from her yet. We are still waiting to hear if she made it home or not yet. Good luck on the rest of you and we will call you soon" was all the information my grandma had for me

Those were the only words I heard her speak. My mom would have checked in with her by now, especially if they had made it home already. The only explanation I could think of was that something had happened, which I doubted, or my older sister Heidi, who was on vacation with them with her family, talked them into stopping somewhere for something stupid along the way home. Either way, I couldn't help but to feel alone and I began to cry. I lit another cigarette and smoked away thinking how much I just wanted to go home and not finish the show. If my sister had anything to do with them missing it, she was going to get an earful when I saw her next. I already hated her and she wondered why when she always does these stunts to annoy me. Just because she doesn't think my acting is important she'll do or say anything to make me miserable. I wiped the tears from my face and saw the stage lights flash three times. Intermission was over. I put out my cigarette, dug in my purse to put on some lip gloss and fix my makeup and headed back to the stage, fake smile fastened securely in place.

A few hours later I was standing on stage with the rest of the cast taking our final bows with the stage lights glowing overhead so that I could not see the audience I began to cry again. Even though I could not see the cheering faces of the assembled crowd, I knew that no one had made it there to see me. When the lights dropped I headed off stage and to my car, only stopping to say goodbye to my cast mates. I would probably be the last time I saw most of them and thankfully they thought the tears streaming down my cheeks were for that reason. I slowly got into my car and drove the three miles back to my house in silence except for my own sobs.

Once I was home I was greeted by my husband who was outside waiting for me: The look on his face said it all. Something was wrong. I walked up to him and was met only by his own tears.

"What happened? What's wrong?" I questioned.

It was then that he finally broke and told me what was going on. I was finally going to know the

reason why everyone had ignored me and why no one was at my show. The thing of it is, was now I don't think I wanted to know. I braced myself for the worst and surly it was just that.

"Your mom had a heart attack on the way home. It happened right after they dropped of your niece in Indianapolis. You're older sister, Lexie, is there now with your dad and you're other sister is home in Wisconsin. Your brother Chas is at your parents' house. I've been told not to tell anyone except for you. They aren't sure how much damage to heart has been done and they are waiting to transport her to a bigger hospital. But it's bad. She might not make it," he said.

After I heard these last few words my world began to spin. Everything became very dark and then I hit the ground. When I woke a few minutes later, I was inside on the couch. I couldn't have been out long, but I guess long enough to be brought inside. I had this horrible feeling in my stomach. I rushed to the bathroom and became sick. I then collapsed on the ground on the floor in the fetal position. I couldn't help but to be angry with myself. The entire evening I was so angry with my mom for not being there and here she was going to die of heart failure. I began to weep again. This time not just for my mother, who I was losing, but because of my own actions and selfishness that I had felt all night long.

I couldn't take not knowing anything. I became angry suddenly. I wanted answers on how my mother was doing. I needed to know that she was okay. After I questioned Freddy for the fifth time I realized he had no more answers. Finally my sister answered her phone but she had no more information than I did. No one did. I called my brother and had him come over. He didn't need to be alone right now.

When he finally made it over a few minutes later we devised a plan. We called every person that knew about my mom until we finally got some answers. My father was out of touch since he was with my mom in the hospital, as was my oldest sister. We decided that we were going to drive to the hospital where she was and see her. That was the only way to make sure she was okay. I was in my room packing when my phone went off. It was my dad. I hadn't spoken to him since I found out and I was angry that he didn't have someone come pull me from my stupid play and tell me at once what was going on. I was sure that my mom was gone and that was why he was calling. I picked up my phone and barely got out the word hello.

"Hi honey, your mom is doing okay. We just made it to Indianapolis. They are going to run some more tests but she's stable. I heard you are going to come down here but that isn't necessary. Please don't drive when you are this upset. If it comes down to it I'll call and you can fly out on the next plane. I told your sister Heidi this as well. Please don't tell anyone what's going on until we know, and I'm sorry we didn't tell you sooner. There's nothing you can

do but wait. I have to go. I love you and I'll talk to you soon. Goodbye," was all he said.

With that the other end of the receiver went dead. I couldn't even get a word in. Not even I love you. It was like a recording had just told me about some tragic story. He was right though. I was in no condition to drive. I called my brother into my room and told him about the phone call from our dad. We both just looked at each other and began to cry again. He hugged each other tightly and collapsed on my bed. Hours passed as we clung to each other for support. My brother eventually cried himself to sleep. But I laid there in the darkness of my room staring up at the white pop corned ceiling for hours thinking about the events of the night. I was so selfish. I was worried only about myself but not about why no one was there for me. I worried about my mom. I hadn't heard another word from my dad all night.

I could not believe I acted so selfishly about my mom not being at the play. She is my best friend. I knew there would have had to be a good reason for her not to make and to break a promise to me. I had done nothing all night but worry about myself when I could have lost my mother. My petty thoughts towards my sister didn't help either. I am sure she was just as worried as I was. Even though my sister and I had our differences we were still family and I should have respected that instead of thinking horrible things about her. The same goes for my husband as well. I knew he was not going to be at my show tonight. He had been to opening night and didn't want to go again. I should not have been as angry as I was that he wasn't there. The idea that I was alone though did not sit with me well. I just wish someone had told me what had happened. The fact that I was kept out of the dark made me feel like a child and I suppose by the way I acted tonight my family was in the right not to tell me and try to protect me. My thoughts kept my mind racing. My fear kept my heart beating fast. And the darkness of my room kept me feeling alone. Eventually when the sun began to shine into my room from the window I fell asleep.

A few hours later when I awoke I found myself still very upset. This time I was not only upset at my family, but more with myself. I had become completely aware of how self-absorbed I was and inconsiderate of others I am. My mom's heart attack made me realize that there are more important things in life than my own things. I walked into the kitchen and found my brother sitting there eating a bowl of cereal. He didn't look any more relieved than I did. I grabbed a bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch for myself and we sat in silence together while we ate. I'm sure he was thinking about Mom just as much as I was. I finished my cereal and put the bowl in the sink. Then I solemnly walked into my bedroom and got my phone and dialed my father's number.

After a long talk I had learned that my mother would be okay. They had taken her in for surgery.

The doctors were going to put stents into her heart to keep the blood flowing through the valves and she would have to watch her diet and be on medication for the rest of her life. They also found that she had smaller vessels throughout her body and another heart attack was bound to happen again, or maybe open heart surgery in the future. My parents were staying in Indianapolis for a few more days to give my mom some time to recover then they were coming home.

After the conversation with my dad ended I felt relieved. I finally had answers. I knew that my mom would make it. She would be home soon. Tears of joy streamed down my face. I looked over at my brother and told him what our dad had just told me and he hugged me more tightly than he ever had in his life. He went into the living room and watched television. I decided it was best that he stay at my house for the rest of the day and just relax. In the morning we would both go to our parents' house and get everything ready for our mom when she returned.

While my brother watched t.v. I sat at my kitchen table and let out a sign of relief. I had survived the worst night of my life. It was an odd feeling though. I had learned many things that night about myself that I didn't realize before. I was self-centered. I really only cared about myself. Sure, I loved my family, but my main concern was me. It always had been I suppose. The thought of losing my mom made me jump back and reevaluate my priorities. Maybe because I was so self-absorbed was a contributing reason as to why my sister and I didn't get along among others. The night before made me realize that I needed to change how I behaved and thought. In an odd way I found myself being grateful for the lesson I learned. But mostly, I was grateful that I did not lose my best friend, my mom. §

Goodbye Little Robots

Ashley Mason

The bench hurt my butt. It was hard, steel, and cold, but I was elated to be sitting on that cool exterior. Not because I enjoy sitting on unpleasant surfaces, making my behind ache no matter which way I lean, but because of who the bench belonged to. The bench was plain, a simple layout of a backboard, a bottom, and legs to hold the seat up right. I did not believe the bench owners intended to make their customers very comfortable, but I did not care, because on the backboard of the bench were two words punched into hard metal like inside out Braille, coated in blue coloring to make them pop, United Airlines.

Mothers carrying purses loaded to the brim with, most likely, items that will only come in handy once in a lifetime, tugged awed five year olds towards their baggage pick up. The purses were weighing them down to the left, the children were pulling them down on the right, and the cell phones were suffocating between shoulder and ear leaving an awkward kink in their necks. Business men in perfectly tailored suits and tap dancer shoes played with the beat of my heart as they briskly walked to their next pay check, with not a wrinkle in their pressed fabrics from the plane ride.

There were others in my position, waiting on the benches for who ever it was they were waiting for. Maybe their mothers, fathers, both, sister, brother, child, husband, wife, close friend, or boss. A young woman wearing navy blue brushed out a stray fold in her knee length dress. Her shoulders were covered with a white shawl, her hair curled and pinned in back, with soft bangs brushing her cheeks. A boy and girl sat at each side of her slim figure, so quiet they appeared adult, but only standing at the average six year olds' height. The twins held the young woman's hands, all three staring at the passing mother's with their awkward kinked necks. I assumed they were waiting for a husband and father.

A woman rich with wrinkles and age spots clutched her small gaudy pink purse, only removing a hand to every now and then straighten her large brooch right above her left breast. It was fastened to a pink checkered blouse, the large petals of a blue flower contrasting the pink. Her thin fingers would also sometimes trace her plain silver chain wrapped around her wrist, while her eyes gazed to a faraway place only she could know of. It was hard to tell who she was meeting, most likely a son or daughter.

All the waiters, waiting for a person, looked anxious. That is where I was, anxious and waiting. My heart thundered in my chest, fluttering down to my stomach whenever I thought of my special person, my Zane. He was on his plane, landing in roughly ten minutes. My hands were like waterfalls, leaving me wiping them across my denim clad legs every second. My heart was a machine, pumping

blood like oil. The inside of my blood pumping organ throwing a celebration every time I see his face, feel his touch. After four years of long distance he was finally coming to stay for good.

Zane in Colorado studying to become a chemist, and I was here in Chicago, finishing school to become a journalist. Since he would graduate first we agreed to live in Chicago. Today was the day that my life would finally begin. No more months devoid of Zane, it wouldn't be just a week for Christmas, a week for spring break, and a couple months in summer, it would be forever.

"Sophie?" A males' voice cut through the daydreaming, stopping me cold.

The little robots in my heart screamed in excitement, throwing balloons out the windows and rice into the streets of their little city.

I turned to see not Zane, but an old classmate, my heart sunk.

I gestured for the man to take a seat, but he only exchanged a few words of catching up and went on his way, suitcase in tow. I watched him leave, and turn out of sight. I flipped my phone, which had been pressed into my lap, over to view the time. Ten minutes late, and not one call or text all day. I had waited another ten minutes, watching the waiters around me get up to greet their people, all from the flight Zane was supposed to come from.

The elderly woman walked away with another woman, just a few years younger than herself. She must have been meeting a friend, or a sister. The younger woman with her two kids met a man who looked in his thirties, he was clean cut and greeted the woman gruffly. Both of the children grabbed suit cases which I had failed to notice before, and left with the man, back towards boarding. The young woman pulled the pins from her hair and walked away after watching them a moment, in a clear sign of defeat.

I was wrong, ex-husband perhaps. No one was meeting who I had thought, not even myself.

The party in the city of my heart started to slow down, many of the little robots taking to their homes. I loved those little robots, they made my heart so lively. They were the little robots Zane gave me, my love for him. Then, in a matter of minutes, all my little robots that took care of the city in my heart, vanished.

I was sitting on that bench, the one that made me sore, thirty minutes after everyone else had left. I figured Zane had taken a later flight, and was in too much of a rush to call, so I waited. When Zanes' ringtone came singing through my phone I answered without hesitation.

"Zane?" His name tumbled off my tongue in a wave of relief.

The other line was silent for a few breaths. "Hey."

"Where are you, what happened?"

"Soph…I can't come," his voice was far, so far away.

"Why not? What happened? When will you

come?" I couldn't stop the questions, tears involuntarily leaking from my wide eyes.

"I can't come at all, Soph, I wanted to tell you in person, but..." he died off, not really having to finish, but I wanted him to.

My voice cracked against my will. "Why?"

"I met someone, a while ago, I just couldn't bring myself to tell you."

Swallowing hurt, like trying to breath under water. A sob broke through my lips,

"When?" I was covering my mouth in a way that tried to save face. My little robots were screaming, trying to rip through my heart to get out.

Zane cleared his throat, "A while ago, I planned on telling you a couple months ago, but I decided I wanted to tell you in person. But I couldn't do it, I just couldn't come.

I'm so sorry."

I was at a loss for words.

The pressure of the hard plastic in my hand felt good, as if the phone was absorbing all of my anger. I grit my teeth, the suffocating scream building up in my chest. Without realizing, just seconds later, my cell was in pieces on the floor. I kicked the rubble as I shuffled out of the airport, screams bouncing in my throat, begging for release from my clenching muscles trying to hold back desperate tears.

"I hate you," I whispered to myself, even though I knew he wouldn't hear me. He was miles away with his precious person.

It was late, a little past ten at night, but I just tugged my zip-up jacket closer around my small body and walked down the airport sidewalk, not even bothering for a taxi. Walking would clear my mind, and the wind would cool my anger. The high sky rise buildings usually consoled me, held me like the arms of a loving mother and spread out wings to keep me dry. Not tonight though, the towers of glass and steel beams drew away and loomed overhead more like buildings every step. No personification could save me from my depressing state of realization; I was alone.

My family was Zane, and now he was gone. I couldn't keep him from invading my thoughts like a poison, wilting every good memory I had ever had. He was everywhere, his blond hair and bright blue eyes stared at me through every crevice of existence I had. I would have to burn my covers and buy new ones just so they wouldn't smell like his aftershave. No man in my life would ever be able to slather Le Male for Men onto their freshly shaved face from this point on.

I wondered how long Zane knew he wouldn't be coming, and if he was even truly sorry; I wondered what he was doing now, and what I would do soon. My whole entire life was planned around him, around us being together forever. It was always get our degrees, move in together in Chicago, get married, have kids, then just live life. I even accepted becoming a journalist even though it hardly promised large pay because he always said he would

"take care of things" with a chemists' income. My dreamed about future was never pink ponies and rainbows perfect, but it was a future I could not wait for.

It was as if my heart had surrendered on that walk home by taking its own life, my little robots drowning in a decaying city.

. . .

I ghosted up seven flights of stairs, ignoring the elevator, to the only place I knew to go. My small apartment, barely made for two, felt lonely and empty. My head felt fuzzy, similar to a slight buzz after too much, yet not enough liquor. Only I was sober, not an ounce of demoralizing drug in my petite body. I allowed my jacket to slide off my shoulders and slump onto the white carpet, looking as exhausted as myself. Keys clanged on the counter and my purse thumped against the chair, unorganized and dissatisfying. I made a straight b-line for the kitchen drawer, popping a single bullet into the revolver my dad gave to me when I moved out, for protection, he had told me. I then grabbed the best bottle of cheap wine from the fridge, and the house phone, then proceeded to fall onto my couch in a mess of heartache and tears.

I had intended to call Zane calmly and not with bees buzzing in my head, but my emotions had different intentions. After inhaling half of the bottle, inducing a sloppy thought process, I dialed the phone.

"Sophia?" Zane's voice, slightly concerned, resurrected the whimpering pain in my chest.

I pursed my lips tightly, glaring into my silent T.V. screen. "What?"

"You called me."

"Just to remind you what we had will never be again." I felt pathetic, slurring something to him that I should have been forcing myself to believe.

"Soph…you need--"

I cut him off with a half gurgled laugh. He sort of sounded desperate. More than likely desperate to get rid of me for good, I was sure the guilt was killing him. That was fine by me.

"No Zane, don't 'Soph' me. You're a bastard, a goddamn pig!" My harsh tone echoed in my ears. "And…and I hope you remember everything we were, so that it hurts you as much as it hurt me," I fingered the gun that I had let slide to the floor earlier, coasting my hand across the cool barrel, bringing it down to clutch the wooden handle.

"Sophia! You need to stop and listen to me for a second!" There was a hint of a smile behind his words, I could hear the lightness in the hurried words.

I wanted nothing of his light heartedness about such a devastating topic. "Well, Zane, I loved you, I love you, I always will. You hurt me though, you hurt me beyond repair," I choked back a sob and tossed the gun onto the floor, letting the insane thought of suicide slip from my grasp. Even if I didn't have Zane, I could move on; I had a family no matter how far away they lived. My father

always called suicide the weak way out, and he was right, I was much stronger than that.

"Listen, Soph, I'm sorry but--" Zane sounded like it, too, sorry.

I let a small smile play at my parted lips as I made a couple leaps to the kitchen floor and slid to a stop in front of one of the cabinets, "No, I'm sorry Zane. What you have to say will never be good enough, I'll let the bullet do the talking. Goodbye." I opened the cabinet and slammed it shut as hard as I could, causing a sharp bang that resembled the sound of a bullet exiting the barrel of a gun. I dropped the phone with the weight of my body, crashing onto the floor and ready to endure a couple sore muscles for my act.

I laid on the cool linoleum floor, feeling my heart pound in my ears as I held my breath. Zane had screamed my name a couple of times before the line went dead. I dragged my body up from my pretend death position and sat with my knees up to my chin. I was satisfied with my plan, but my heart was still empty and begging for comfort. He would think I died because of him.

That's when panic filtered through my lungs in a large inhale of breath. What if he called the cops? Or my parents? I would look like a fool!

I fumbled for the phone with my shaking fingers and tried to dial the familiar number through blurred vision, the tears making it hard to see. The phone rang until I reached his voicemail and I threw the phone on the floor in frustration.

"Damn it!" I screamed into a fist I contained a thousand pounds of anger in.

I scrambled across my floor on hands and knees and grasped once again for the telephone to dial Zane's number in desperation. Every ring made me grip the electronic device harder and harder, feeling as though the phones were somewhat at fault. How could my only connection to Zane, a phone, not be reaching him? Stupid long distance and Stupid damn phones!

Zane's voice echoed in my ears as familiar as always with his polite, "Thank you for calling and have a nice day." Which followed the infuriating voicemail operator. Phones have been around long enough, I don't need a woman to tell me how to leave a message after the beep, all I need is the beep!

Anger flooded through my veins and burned my toes. I put the phone up to my mouth and screamed as loud as I could, hoping to scare it into reaching Zane, I suppose. Then I made a point to bite a piece of the plastic with most of the pressure my jaw could muster, relieving some of my tense anger. I let the phone drop from my teeth and onto the floor, dripping with saliva. I probably looked like a wicked mess. I had tucked my fingers into my hair and grabbed handfuls at a time, tugging at a suitable level, causing my hair to be a knotted nest. There were many ways to relinquish anger, but putting pressure onto my teeth, fists, and head always worked best. They were like the anger points and applying pressure opened them to fresh air.

I gave up and just sat with my body sprawled out on the floor with the phone weeping in spit. If the police were going to come, so be it. I didn't even care any longer, I was just exhausted. I closed my eyes and blocked out the bright fluorescent light on my kitchen ceiling, letting the uncomfortable situation wrap around me like an itchy blanket. Unintentionally, I let my aching body sleep.

. . .

It couldn't have been more than thirty minutes later that extremely rambunctious pounding threatened to break down my door. I had forgotten about the lock that I flipped secure before everything went even more down hill than originally. I lifted my sad and swollen spirit off of the floor and dragged myself to the door. I would have a lot of explaining to do after all, the policemen would never understand.

"One second!" I yelled before I turned the lock and opened the door.

Once it was open a large figure draped their arms around me and squeezed all of the air our of my poor lungs. I was about to push them away when shakes started to wrack the body. I tilted my head to glimpse the face but all I could make out was blonde.

"Zane?!" I screeched and curled away from the weak arms, stepping back what seemed to be one hundred feet.

Zane ran the back of his hand across his face to wipe up stray tears and slammed a boot clad foot into my white carpet, "I thought you were dead you idiot!"

My hurt expression contorted into confused, "Why would you care?" I asked it hesitantly.

Zane shook his head rapidly then covered the space between us in only half the amount of strides it had taken me to make the space. He grasped both sides of my red cheeks with his palms and made me look into his face while he spoke bluntly, "It was a joke."

My vision started to get fuzzy and distorted from not blinking soon enough, my eyes were drying out like my sanity. I gripped both of my hands into fists and red spots danced behind my pupils. Fire filled my lungs when I sucked a deep breath into my body, and I spit it right back out, "A what?!" I screamed, sounding much like a banshee.

Zane quickly ducked away from my fist and grabbed the other wrist, trying to contain my flailing body. "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!"

Laughter echoed in my ears and surged another tidal wave of a womans' scorn, "You think this was funny?! I almost killed myself you idiot! That was not a joke, that was a torturous, evil, uncalled for, devil's deed!" I spit acid at his face.

Zane moved his hands from my wrists to my own hands and placed his forehead against mine, "But you aren't dead. I am so sorry Sophia, I thought you would be even happier to see me after that terrible idea of a joke. I suppose I didn't think it through all the way. When I got off of the airplane I

just hid in the males bathroom. Then I had to call a taxi, because you were stupid and pretended to kill yourself." He looked sincerely apologetic.

"Zane, I will never forgive you for this, you fool." I pulled back my head and lightly banged my skull into his, satisfied with his wince.

"I'm sorry Soph, I love you."

I rolled my eyes, my heart felt much better, "I'm just glad you didn't call 911."

"I don't even know where my phone went, I know I dropped it somewhere in my heroic sprinting to reach this apartment." He winked and grabbed me up into a hug again.

I ruffled my hands into that blonde hair and inhaled Le Male for Men, "At least I don't have to burn my bed sheets now."

Zane laughed, and I laughed, and my little robots threw rice out into the streets of their repaired city. §

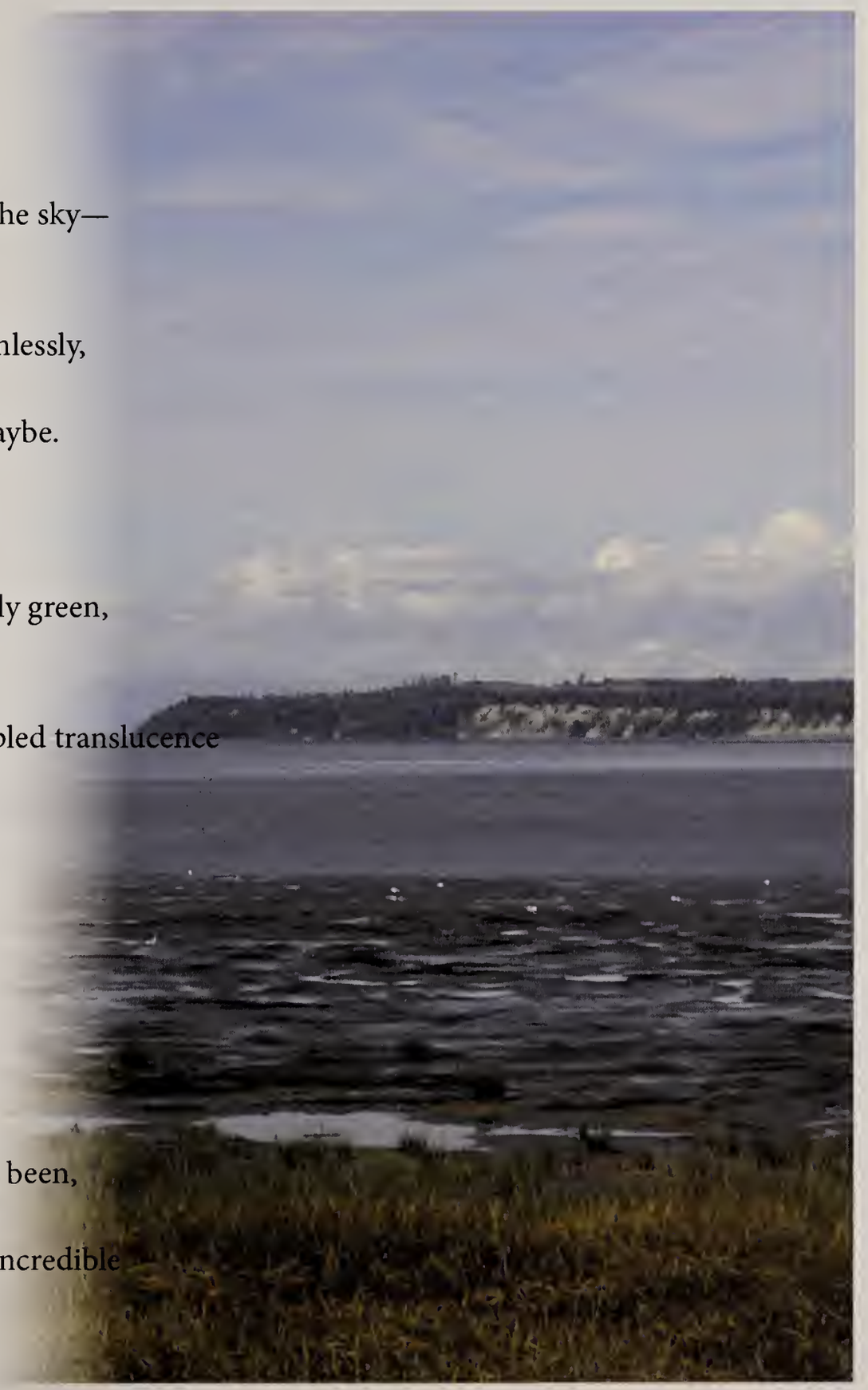
Headlands

Dylan McKee

Far off, where the sea becomes in the sky—
In color, anyway—
The shadow of a hill emerges
Like a great blue whale floating aimlessly,
Surfacing to breathe,
The kind that swallowed Jonah, maybe.

The sea is as it always has been—
How else can it be described?
It is blue and white and occasionally green,
Reflecting whatever is above
And blurring what lies below,
Where the two combine into a rippled translucence
That extends to the Earth's curve.

On this dry spit of headland,
A couples stands and surveys,
Whale watching perhaps.
The man's hand is on her hip,
And they stare in wonder.
But there is nothing sublime—
Nothing Biblical.
It is simply the sea, as it always has been,
And a tract of raised land—
The origins of which are no more incredible
Than shifting plate tectonics
Or receding tides—



It is the earth doing only what it knows to do.
It has always been there,
Before them and anyone else
Who stared in wonder,
And will be there forever,
Until the Earth moves again
Or the tides rise,
And then it will be gone.

Open Heart

Rebecca Mackowicz

The scar zigzags across my chest.
The incision, a cross transversal
disguised as my body matured,
looks like a smiling ribbon
embroidered in flesh.
At the top of my rib cage
are two pale white slits, twins
to the ones on the sides of my ribs,
where the tubes ran in and out
to circulate my blood. The left one
puckers like drawn-in lips.

A ventricular septal defect.
Difficult words for my parents to bear.
The day I was born, my dad says,
was the best day of his life,
and the worst. My heart swished
like a washing machine, and my mom,
nervous of my blue-tinged lips,
kept me in bed next to her,
afraid to let me sleep in the crib.

Four years old. The hospital room
where primary colored cards and trucks
drove across crisp white curtains
yet never moved. Where children

with myriad damages and defects
awaited the miraculous touch of doctors.
Where parents silently prayed
for their child to be spared.

And I was unaware of the enormity of it all,
Only conscious of gifts everyone brought,
Local celebrities who came to visit.
I remember waking after my surgery
to pick out a magnet of Pluto, Mickey's orange dog,
walking down the hall, much sooner
than expected, for the reward
of an orange popsicle,
and taking baths in an inch of water
tape covering my chest from right to left.

For years, I didn't know
That I might not have lived to eighteen
Without open-heart surgery.
I guess that isn't something you tell a child.

Thirty-three years old. The double smiles
that curve beneath my breasts,
a constant reminder of a broken, mended heart
that still likes to fail at times
with palpitations that pull me to pieces.
Its abnormal beating, a peculiar
symphony with a conductor
that only I can feel.

The Illustrated Man

Rebecca Mackowicz

He doesn't look like the type to have a tattoo
or several for that matter. Arms covered by ink.
A purple-gray scorpion against a blood red sky
covers his right bicep, a painting on a canvas of skin.
On his left arm, a golden cross nestles in clouds
of Technicolor ribbons. Less tattoo than art,

these indelible images. A brand, this art
that some view as desecration, a tattoo
that covers human flesh the way the clouds
cover the sun. This man, illustrated with ink,
I have never known with naked skin.
On his back, woven in blue vibrant as the sky,

lies a tribal web for a spider (dropped from the sky)
in vivid shades of purple and red. A deadly art.
Its colors, like poison, permeate the skin.
Around his lower left bicep loops a tattoo,
a thorny, knot-work rose in blain black ink
Its bars form the horizon below the clouds.

Ideas for new designs form in his mind like clouds.
A Sith eye on his back, red as a sunset sky.
Or perhaps just the symbol, in darkest, evil ink
to encapsulate the dark side through art.
But he can't justify another tattoo.
Besides, he's beginning to run out of skin.

Not like those with tattoos canvassing every inch of skin.
To stay professional, his designs are hidden in clouds
of ink, placed where no one would suspect a tattoo.
On his right ankle, a firebird wings the sky
of skin, a tribute to a revered musician's art.
Its wings fly flames of crimson-orange ink.

His left calf was first baptized in black ink
with an ankh, Egyptian for eternal life. Skin
tattooed, permanent for his existence. This ancient art
as old as the earth and the sea and the clouds.
His children will be immortalized in ink, like the sky
on a winter's morning. Daddy's last tattoo.

What will be his final ink? Ideas like nebulous clouds
wait to embellish skin. Their blueprints drift across the sky
of his mind. What is art? To him, it's a tattoo.

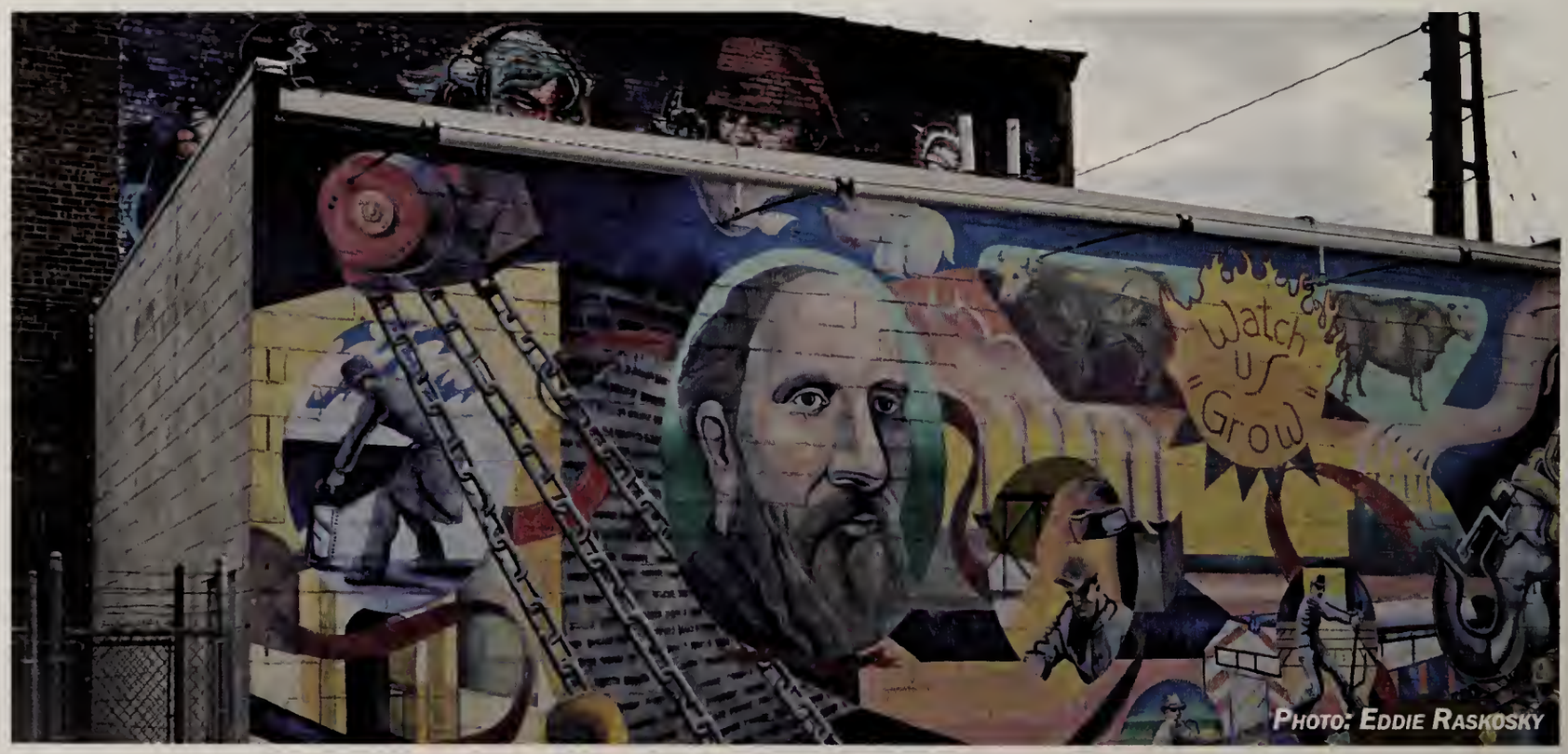


Photo: Eddie Raskosky

Dance with a Petitioner

Mark Bochucinski

Quickly quietly come closer
Sound should seem searing
kissing thee is a quenching thought
your young beauty is blinding
taunting me

our actions are deadly
one kiss is all I want
out of step is all you need
to be in my grasp
dancing still

Your fame is your desire
and soon you will achieve it
all of Broadway has seen it
your goal is not too distant

The best is what you are
and Immortality is why you beg
out of step is all you need
one false move with your leg

gawking at your grace
these people with stoned face
your dance is like an angel's
with a most heavenly choir
your fame is your desire

There! Quickly catching on cue
so simple shall this seem
our eyes entrapped in engagement
so you see what is required
your life for Immortality's sake

dying in youth seems so mean
coincidentally it could close this scene
for fame's flame is flourishing
following imminently, definitely, Immortality

Don't cry my dear my name is Death
I will give you your dream just for your last breath
I'll kiss you now, such a beautiful sight
the crowd is watching this developing fight

You asked for it though now you refuse
all your petitions are what I use
to make my decisions can't you see
You are the one who asked this of me

Then this shall be our last chord together
never beg never send another letter
your last second refusal shall not be forgotten
because of this betrayal your life will go rotten
this fall will be the end of your dream
I plead do not scream

we made a deal not to be broken
but your changing desires need not be spoken

you put up this fight
and now I'm offended
and for this very reason your life shall be ended

But your heart will beat
and your breathe will take
your leg is what I will break
a fall from this stage
pity, perfect age

Your beauty will not be seen
you're a bird with a clipped wing

Soon shall we separate
but before I'll be leaving
questions? qualms? concerns?

Listen! unlike the living
this betrayal I shall not be forgiving

Verle the Barber

Phil Siemer

Verle the Barber was the first
one out. By himselfn
that ol' johnboat.
Green. A 9.9 outboard on it.
With that pole he'd fashioned
Outta two broom sticks,
he'd hoist stripers
outn pairs. Shaped like a T
with five foota line off each
enda the top. No reel
on it. We watched reeled
empty
lures.
One bass flopped up
Against his metal gunnels
As he took the hook outta
The othern. Had that pretty
Bassn his bucketn
One fell swoop.
Met his limit and more
before the sheriff
left the donut shop.
We never seen Verle the Barber
come out, but every time
we fished
we see him turn home.
Sonuva bitch.

Post Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome

Phil Siemer

The dishes in the sink weren't even rinsed.
Her coat, no longer draped across a chair,
lies spilt upon the hardwood. I'm convinced
it's only dizziness. Three years, unfair,
she says. I pour her water and see some
drip off the counter. Damn pitcher can't pour
right, like all else here. Enough with this syndrome.
The doctor said to drink more water. Or
I should make her strengthen her willpower.
It'll be easy. Her veins don't constrict;
blood pressure drops. I'll find some time, an hour
for her to jog. My pace. This can't restrict
what I want us to be. I must protect
this marriage we've started. I have to be direct.

Summer Camp

Miranda Morley

They found her face down in a mud pit. Thick,
the consistency of brownie batter.
When they turned her over, it looked like she'd
just been the victim of a camp stunt, a
pie eating contest, perhaps, a food fight.

For hours, we tried to bring her back:
CPR, an ambulance rushed to Marion
North, two hundred teenagers in hushed
huddles scattered across a silent
sports field in prayer for Lazarus-like
resurrection, making bargains with God
to never smoke, or drink or have sex again.

By evening service we'd all showered, put
on fresh makeup and changed into our best,
so sure the evangelist would speak of
her miraculous recovery, but
instead he opened in the Psalms, told us
she had passed away, and dismissed us to find our
pastors. Seated in a circle, we took
turns asking Pastor Paul questions he could
not answer, hugging each other, amazed
that we had all managed to last this long.

We were shuffled back to our cabins to
pray, to seek guidance away from boys'

distraction. Someone slipped me a cell phone,
and I called my momma who said that now
is the time to choose between faith and doubt—
and that the choice would always be mine

PHOTO: LAURA EARLY

Chesterton High School

Miranda Morley

Nobody knows the high school is built
on a swamp – the people who play bingo
at the Moose and eat breakfast at the North
Side are still calling it the "new high school,"
still betting on how many years the school
board will get out of it before, hungry,
The ground sucks it back up, swallows it whole.

When I walk through the doors I almost think
I feel the floors sink, succumbing to ten
years of tugging, the tempered revenge of
this once-wild wetland, temporarily
subdued by the city's need for "progress."

Yet in this moment, she surely is alive,
the snare drum beats a steady pulse, faltering
only at the slip of some sweaty hand,
an expected, natural arrhythmia.

I walk down a stretch of hall, passing an
art teacher perched on a stepstool; her skirt
is yellow, the same color as most of
the sunflower paintings she carefully
hangs in the display case, each with its own
plaque that bears the name of the artist in
big, black block letters. My name was once on

one of these plaques, lying at the bottom
of the display case, waiting to be hung,
but it never was. The teacher ran out
of room. It graced the bottom of her trash
can. As I walk by, I realize, I
too, had drawn a sunflower – it was the
same assignment. It was the same teacher.

My shoes click on the chipped tile. I heard they
removed the carpet a few years ago—
too many spills, too much flooding, what with
the swamp and all. Without the carpet, and
with the new names on the teachers' doors, it
takes me a few minutes to remember
that this is the hallway where I walked away.
I feel suddenly surrounded by the
ghosts of what might have been. I didn't talk
to you for a year after that day. I
avoided that hallway because I could
never walk it without wondering what
would have been if I had just turned around,
run after you, like I'd done every time
before. Had we not met later, this hall
could have changed everything, both our lives.

And yet, this Friday, at the Moose, Greg will
hold a beer in one hand, a bingo card
in the other, and between puffs on his
cigarette, laugh at the expense of the
school board, and say that he's got a buddy
who's ready to give the place another

twenty years before she's absorbed by the
swamp, before the wetlands take her back and
that hallway that means so much to us is
nothing. It reminds me that someday we'll
be nothing, sucked up by the ground, swallowed whole.

PHOTO: JOEL FUENTES

Dance in the Rain

PennyJo Veatch

We stand there side by side
  Watching the stream of rain
Creating puddles in the yard.
We stand inside warm and dry
  Wanting to be a part of
The natural shower happening outside.

With a laugh and a shrug of our shoulders
  We dash out with upturned faces.
Dancing in the rain
With a laugh, we let the rain tickle our outsides
  And refresh us inside
As we drink in the life-giving saltiness of new life.

We are soaked to the skin
  And filled to the brim with laughter and new hope.
To be wet, to be together.
We are soaked, but we don't care
  To be a child again
To dance like a child again.

The Glimpse

Lauren Schlipmann

1.
Pockets of her hot breath threaten
To steam over her view. Her brow presses
Heavily against the glass.
She takes in the lines of his back, the stretching of his arms
As he anchors the sapling
In the neat square planter in the sidewalk below.
He leans up suddenly, thrusting
His shoulders back, resting fists on hips.
His eyes roll evenly up to her window, resting on her diaphanous form.
She raises a slim hand
To tap a gentle chord on the pane.
Unreservedly he marks her.

2.
Goodbyes were uttered
Amidst hushed whispers, brushing fingers, twining limbs
In a manner that knew not yet of the meaning of separation.

Her father darkened her door.
"It is time."
A rough hand at her elbow. Ushering her down
Back steps, through the alley, to the car, the train, and the faraway coast.

3.
He, back to his labor, a
Growing darkness mars the hollows of his face,
A distance deepens in his eyes

As he works the mucky clay soil around
The bent sapling's base.

4.
I steady myself tenuously:
A hand on the crusty trunk of the now towering tree, their tree,
As I tie my shoe I glimpse on the nearby fence
Two shadows near my own, embracing
Slowly, hesitantly
As if uncertain that time had given birth to distance.
I turn to see the lovers,
And face nothing but
The long stretch of white sidewalk, burning hot in the slanting summer sun.

Imagining Reality

Daniel Mitchell

"Reality is the canvas on which we create." —Anonymous

October 1996, kindergarten, age 6. I walk the steps of the evil emperor's chamber. My hands are cuffed, as my father leads me to the dark throne. The emperor turns to me, his frightening face leering, evil, but for some reason, happy. My father hands me over to him, not as an act of good or bad, but as a next step toward my understanding of the Force. This doesn't feel right. This evil place cannot be a next step toward anything. They want me to fight, to unleash the power of the Dark Side. I don't understand. Why would anyone want this power? Why would anyone want to be the bad guy? I will not fight! I will not join the Dark Side! The emperor will be forced to destroy me... my only hope is my father. He knows that this can't be right either. He is the only good in this dark room.

1996, kindergarten, age 6. My first day of kindergarten I entered the room excited and full of expectation. The room was a bright tan color, decorated with suns, clouds and other elements of the sky. Children were playing on the carpet with more toys than I had ever seen in a classroom, even my pre-school! A group of four kids played with a giant Ghostbusters play-set. It was clearly the best toy in the room. I ran up to play with them, but they told me I wasn't allowed to play. I didn't understand. When I asked why, all they said was "Cuz!". This didn't seem right, and I was pretty sure they were just making up this rule. Attempting to join them once more, I grabbed an abandoned toy ghost. Realizing I didn't get the message, one of the children ripped the plastic specter from my hand and shoved me away, challenging me. They want me to fight. I don't want to fight. My parents are my only hope. They are the only ones who can save me from this dark room.

September 1997, 1st grade, age 7. I face off against the evil Shadow-Borg, the Beetleborg's greatest enemy. He seems to always be one step ahead of me. My powers are no match for him. He quickly beats all of my friends with one swipe of his claw. It's just me and him now. I'm not sure I can win. Without friends to help me, things look really bad. He wraps his grapple hook around my neck, choking me. I try to fight, but I'm just not strong enough. My armor disintegrates into nothing but a blue light of energy, floating above my head. Raising his hand in triumph, Shadow-Borg absorbs my powers, making him stronger than ever. The only person who can defeat him now is the White Beetleborg... but he is nowhere to be found. It looks like Shadow-Borg has finally won, once and for all.

1997, 1st grade, age 7. Throughout first grade I struggled to do well in school. My self confidence had been shattered between the ruthlessness of my peers and the cruelty of my teacher, who was literally on the brink of a nervous breakdown. If I had understood then the context of my teacher's misdeeds, perhaps I wouldn't have been

as affected, but then again, wickedness, regardless of the catalyst, is often hard to overcome. Sickness seemed to creep around every corner, maybe due to the stress or merely a poor immunity. Whatever the cause, I had been plagued most of the year with strep, chicken pox and countless ear infections. To add insult to injury, I even spent my Christmas vacation recovering from a tonsilectomy. Though I'd hate to admit it, I looked forward to these ailments. They were an oasis, a safe haven in the midst of a fierce and unforgiving desert. When I wasn't sick at home, I often retreated into myself, daydreaming about better places. These daydreams, more times than not, manifested themselves as my own creations, heroic tales where I was the protagonist, I was the hero who overcame the evil plight! But even in these places, my hero had been robbed of his power. He needed an ally, someone, anyone by his side. I await the White Beetleborg, but he is nowhere to be found.

October 1998, 2nd grade, age 8. Confidently I enter through the doors of the gym leader's chamber, my belt perfectly armed with Pokeballs at the ready. The gym leaders emerge from the shadows, their faces slowly illuminated by the dim blue light. I should've known! It's the evil Team Rocket! The dark-sided oafs waddle to the center of the gym, accepting my challenge. I smirk, as the ridiculous villains give their long winded monologue explaining my inevitable defeat. Not patient enough for them to finish, I whip out Charizard, the fire-dragon Pokemon! Team Rocket scrambles to defend themselves, sending out three Pokemon at once, cheating as usual. No matter, Charizard and I are an invincible team, nothing can stop us!

1998, 2nd grade, age 8. In 2nd grade I finally got a teacher who not only understood me, but was willing to help me. It became apparently clear over the years that I had ADD, which explained my constant daydreams and over-excessive creativity, that I like to refer to as, "productive daydreaming". Though not entirely reaching my full potential, I did start improving in my school work.

My self-confidence was beginning to rebuild itself, brick by brick, and for the first time ever, I had a friend at school. His name was Kyle, and he had just moved into town from California. I saw a lot of myself in him: shy, uncertain, but at heart, creative and adventurous. At risk of being cliche, I confess, we did absolutely everything together. When I wasn't sleeping over at his house, he was staying the night at mine.

However, the greatest bond we shared was our love of imagination. Most of our time was spent outside creating fantastic adventures and bringing our expeditions into the basement whenever the weather wasn't permitting. Although, I was just happy to share my creative worlds with a friend, these imaginative journeys we took together allowed Kyle to escape from a much darker reality. With his dad a severe diabetic, his mom fighting breast cancer, and his older sister threatening sui-

cide at every turn, I became a sanctuary from the uncertainty and instability of his deteriorating home life. Kyle may have shielded me from my own demons, but I was able to remove him, even for brief intervals, from his. Kyle and I are an invincible team, nothing can stop us!

September 2000, 4th grade, age 10. I follow Qui-gon into the power-core, fighting Darth Maul in an epic lightsaber duel to the death. Darth Maul knocks me off the ledge, separating me from Qui-gon. Qui-gon continues forward, leaving me behind, still engaged with Darth Maul. I grab my lightsaber and jump back up onto the platform, running after Qui-gon. Just before I can reach him, a forcefield appears, dividing me from my friend. It's just Qui-gon and Darth Maul now. There's nothing I can do to help. Qui-gon tries to defend himself, but the dark Sith is just too powerful. Qui-gon is weakening, he can't fight much longer. Darth Maul sees the chink in his defense and takes the opportunity to run him through. I've lost him. I've lost my friend.

2000, 4th grade, age 10. In 1999, my elementary school began a three-year-long remodeling process. Normally this would not have been a problem had the project been conducted during off hours, but in the interest of saving shift differential costs, instruction collided with instruction. Rather than having her extremely distracted son with ADD attempt to take vocabulary exams in a virtual war zone, my mom officially quit her job as a computer engineer to start homeschooling me. Homeschool allowed me to focus on the subjects I excelled in and take extra time with the ones I struggled with.

Overall, it was probably the best thing that ever happened for me. Unfortunately, my friend Kyle didn't share in my good fortune. He had been held back a year, and had to cope with my absence from school. Though I always came over after school and made every effort to maintain our friendship, it became harder and harder for him to identify with me. The barrier of misunderstanding is often built with bricks of self pity, and I was powerless against its unclimbable surface.

Kyle quickly found new friends amongst a shadier, more depressed cliental. The one friend I remember in particular was David, a boy who had also been dealt a fairly bad hand in life, which was often reflected in his behavior. Kyle was torn between the intimate friendship we once had and the darker identity he felt he shared with David. It didn't take long for Kyle to fall prey to David's bad influence. Then, without warning, completely and suddenly, Kyle had broken off all contact with me. We never even had the luxury of a fight, a parting of ways, or a chance at redemption. It was as though he had died.

To this day I'm not sure how I would've preferred it, ending in bitterness or mourning. I never knew what it was like to have a best friend die, but I was pretty sure this is what it must feel like. Darth Maul is too powerful. I've lost my friend.

March 2003, 7th grade, age 13. Darkness surrounds me. I'm left alone in this empty space with nothing but hunger and thirst to accompany my misery. Heat beats against me with an overwhelming burning sensation. I gasp for air, but cannot breath. The suffocating black seems endless. I cough and sputter, my throat dry and shriveled. Desperate to escape, I grope around for a door, a wall, anything to lead me out of this pit. Hopelessness sets in. I realize there is nothing to grasp. Unable to hold back the screams in my head I wail in agony, begging for my freedom. I open my eyes, and I find myself in a well lit room. The judges and audience clap for me. I feel so relieved, finally, a sense of belonging. I've found an end to the endless darkness. I've found a place where creation meets reality.

2003, 7th grade, age 13. Still homeschooling into my middle school years, my mom decided that it was time to take my education beyond the walls of our house. At age 12 I had become the youngest volunteer ever to join the John G. Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, working in the Interpretive Guest Services department. Though I excelled greatly in this adult environment, my mom thought it might behoove me to have an extracurricular activity that involved working with my peers. Since I had already shown a great aptitude for public speaking at Shedd, she entered me into a local speech club. Thinking speech was only about standing up on stage and presenting boring topics to equally boring people, I wasn't too thrilled about this sudden enrollment. However, when I learned that the speech club had categories for drama, comedy and other creative mediums, I quickly took to the idea.

My first year I performed a comedic excerpt from the book, The Phantom Tollbooth. It was with this endearing piece that I took 4th place at my first tournament. But, as entertaining as my comedy routine was, it was the dramatic piece, Destiny, that brought to bare my true potential. Destiny was a fifteen minute narrative about a teenager thrust into the void of death. He painstakingly realizes as his insanity and torture escalate, that he is indeed in Hell. This piece required a level of vulnerability on my part that I had never publicly exhibited before... a sense of despair, regret and self loathing.

However, it was through this character that I found myself able to face the darkness, walk through the flames and overcome the defenseless, weak person I once was. Imagination had always played a key role in my spiritual survival. It provided sanctuary when there was none to be found, understanding amongst a world devoid of reason, and sewed together the broken seams of my character. Creation was, and still is, the way I interact with the world. A form of communication that everyone hears, but not all understand. It is the garment in which the human spirit dresses reality, adorning its frail, naked body. For the first time, I was able to see this subtle, but now painfully blatant connection, between the forged guardian of imagination and

the once faceless adversary, reality. No longer was my creativity just child's play or a means of escape, it could be exercised, practiced and applied to life. Imagination wasn't just a vessel of personal healing anymore, but could reach out and touch the world, speak to it, and be seen by it, sharing insights and experiences that exist beyond the tangible surface we call truth. Tearing down the imaginary walls I had built all around me, I began constructing the palace of reverie anew, forging a set-piece that I discovered absent from its predecessor... a door. I had found an end to the "endless darkness." An end where creativity begins. §

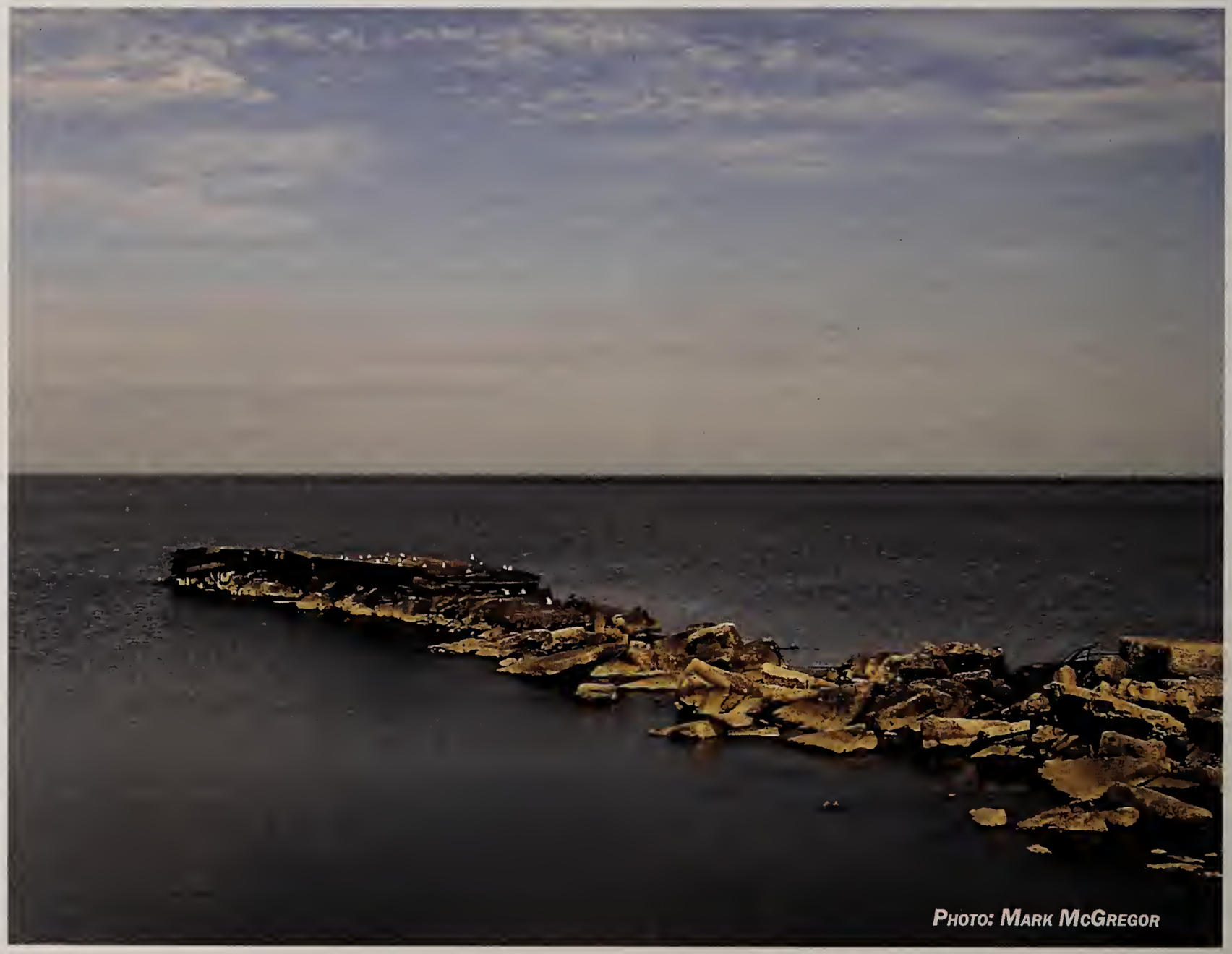


PHOTO: MARK MCGREGOR

Shattered

Natalia Lee

February, 2003

I never thought that I would have to stare down the barrel of a gun, let alone two. Only minutes prior I had been a somewhat normal seventeen year old, sitting on my bed doing homework, American Idol on in the background. I had been comfortable in my own little world. My only concern before this had been making sure I survived my senior year. I had been taking this last year seriously, and in the next few moments I would be seriously shaken to the core. My world was turned on its head in that moment.

. . .

I felt like a prisoner in my own living room. There I was, sitting on the couch; smashed against my brother and cradling my six year old sister who was crying the hardest I had ever seen. I sat there numb, watching these barbaric men tear our home apart. They seemed like they had no other concern in the world than what they had come for, my father. I wanted to cry, but I knew that wouldn't do any good. I needed to stay strong for my family. My mother was standing in the kitchen, on the phone, crying, stumbling over her words. An officer was over her shoulder coaching her on the words to say, trying to convince my father to come home. My mind was racing, and a million thoughts were popping up. Just the uncertainty of what was going to happen made me sick to my stomach. What are we going to do now? Where are we going to live? How long is my dad going to be in prison?

After what seemed like an eternity, one of the officers advised my siblings and me to go wait in my bedroom. He followed us and stood guard in the doorway, using his body to barricade us in. He seemed not as intense as the others. I think he had children of his own. He started to make conversation with me and commented on the décor of my room. The glowing purple Christmas lights on my vanity, the That 70's Show poster on the wall above my bed and the mini disco ball I created hanging from my ceiling. I felt comfortable with him, so I humored him and turned off the main light to my room, revealing the disco ball in all its glory.

He allowed me to turn on the television. American Idol was still on. We talked about it for a bit, and I could tell he had never watched the show before. We made small nonsense chit chat before I started to run out of patience and asked if I could use the bathroom. I didn't really have to go to the bathroom; I wanted to be alone, just for a second. The officer let me go and told me to hurry back. I didn't realize my dogs were locked inside the bathroom. They were frightened and tried to escape the moment I tried to open the door. I wedged my way through the cracked door and sat with them for a while. They were shaking and crying. I calmed them down, petting their little heads, then I placed a towel on the floor so they had a comfortable place

to sleep. I lay down next to them, pressing my ear to the floor. All the officers were in the basement. I could hear them destroying the house, talking loudly and laughing. I was so angry. How could this be funny? What could possibly be funny about this?

I gathered myself together and went back into my room. The officer who was guarding my room was gone. No one was in my parent's room across the hall, so I decided to peek in. It was destroyed, all the drawers open, everything spewed across the room. Also, a big pile of dog crap in the middle of the floor. The officers didn't have the decency to take the search dog outside, let alone clean up the mess the dog made. We were nothing to them. We didn't matter and neither did our home.

I guess my brother and sister were moved to my brother's room while I was in the bathroom. I went and checked on them to make sure they were okay. My sister seemed calmer and my brother was just lying with her watching cartoons. My sister's face was swollen from crying so much. Earlier I had been worried she would cause the blood vessels in her eyes to burst, but I would probably cry that much, too, if I were six years old and my innocent world was shattered. I heard some footsteps coming up the stairs, so I darted back to my room.

I sat on my bed pretending to watch TV. I stared at the screen, not really focused on what was happening, but silently wishing I could switch lives with any of the people on the screen, any of them. An officer appeared in my doorway.

"You doing okay?"

"Yep."

"Okay."

His obligatory question was just as empty as his eye contact. He didn't even bother to check on my siblings across the hall. Jerk.

I went back to spying on what was happening in the basement. I pressed my ear to my bedroom floor. My wooden floor was cold and soothing. All the voices were muffled, but I could make out my father's voice. I couldn't hear what he was saying, there were too many voices drowning his out. I panicked, not knowing what was going on. I wished I could just walk down those stairs and scream at him, punch him, hug him.

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I lay in my bed, listening to the last of the cops leaving my house. I didn't want to leave my room. I wanted to go to sleep and pretend everything was okay. My mom was standing in the doorway, her eyes red and puffy from crying. She quietly told me to come into the kitchen and then walked away. I groggily pushed myself up in the bed, propping my head against the headboard. A wave of dizziness fell over me. I sat there for about a minute or two and let it pass. I got up and walked toward the kitchen, to swallow the hard truth of reality.

My sister looked pale; she was sitting next to my mom, her head resting against her arm. My brother was quiet, not his usual happy funny self. He was always laughing and giggling but not today.

Today he is stone, no emotion in his face, just sitting there. He has totally removed himself from the situation. He wasn't my brother at the moment and I wasn't his sister. He wasn't there.

We sat at the table in silence. It took a few tries for my mom to explain what was going on, but she would get choked up and sob each time she tried. When she finally got the words out, a wave of relief poured over her. She seemed a bit better, no longer having the urge to cry. She was exhausted, being forced to call my father over and over again, leading the officers all over the house and fighting with an officer that threatened to take us kids away. My mom told us the basement was a mess and needed to be cleaned up. I could only imagine. She said we wouldn't be attending school in the morning, so not to worry, just to get changed and meet her downstairs.

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I stood at the top of the stairs, reluctant to go down. I knew what was waiting for me. I knew what damage had been done. I held my breath and took one stair at a time. I felt a mix of nausea and dizziness. The aftermath was worse than I had imagined.

Scanning the room, it looked as if a tornado had hit our house. Not one thing was left untouched. I could not have fathomed before this how much destruction a few men could do. I wanted to vomit. Is this where the laughter was coming from? Was this just all a joke to them? This search was nothing like it was on Law and Order. This was much worse; this was reality.

Our couch was overturned, knife slashes covering it as if a lion had used it as a scratching post. Ceiling tiles hung down. Some were already on the ground cracked in half. Our media cabinets were flipped onto their sides, the glass doors shattered with glass glistening all over the carpet. My sister's toy chest was upside down and her poor toys scattered all over the floor, crushed by the weight of heavy-set males.

My mom came back downstairs with a pile of garbage bags. My brother and I each took a bag. We turned and stared at the mess for a few seconds, puzzled on where to start. We decided it was easier to all start on the left-side of the room and move our way to the other side. Maneuvering through the destruction, we started to pick up everything. We were silent. There was really nothing to say. We were just trying to pick up the pieces. §

A Crack in the Wall

Clay Myers

"We really love each other, I'm so sorry you had to hear that, everything will be ok." One of these is what my mother would tell me the next morning after yet another fight between her and my father. There were so many and yet I can only seem to remember one. Perhaps my mind has mashed them down into a thick mass, trying to help me forget how many times I had to listen to the yelling, the smashing, the horribly terrifying silences, and the cars driving off into the distance. Most people would assume that when parents get divorced it is upsetting for the children. However, in my experience that isn't always so true. The day my father sat me down on my bed and told me that he would be leaving, that he loved me, and that everything would be ok, I breathed a sigh of relief. I can still remember the night that made me start to wish for the day my father sat me on the bed. It was when I first realized, even as a young boy, that these two people shouldn't be together.

It was the night before my first family reunion. It was going to be the first time I would meet a lot of the people from my father's side of the family. I was lying in bed; the room was dimly lit by the street light outside the window. My sister was sleeping on the bed across the room. It always started the same way and this time was no different. A slight raising of my father's voice from their bedroom made my tiny heart start to race. I opened my eyes and stared across my room and out the door. I was listening as hard as I could, hoping that I had heard wrong. That it was just a temporary moment of anger, or maybe he had banged his toe or fallen out of bed. I didn't want to hear anything else, but I was listening so hard that I could hear the refrigerator running half a house away.

My parents never seemed to be happy. I wondered what it was that kept them together. I didn't understand how two people who seemed to hate each other so much would want to be together. I still don't understand, and honestly if their divorce had happened sooner I don't think our lives would have changed much. To say that during this time our family walked on eggshells was an understatement. We walked on tiny shards of broken glass sitting above hot coals.

Nobody wanted to be the one to set my dad off. You never knew what it would be: spending too much time inside, too much time outside, talking to him too much, or not enough. It seemed that it didn't matter what it was we were actually doing. All that mattered was he was upset and someone had to pay for it, and we all did. His way to deal with problems was to yell, sometimes I heard him throw things. It was an intimidation tactic. If you wouldn't agree with him because of his words, he figured he would get you to agree with him through fear.

Then it happened, what I had been dreading

was no longer something I could pretend wasn't going on in the room next door. Now they were both shouting, I don't remember about what. My dad was stringing as many curses into his sentences as his tongue would allow, and my mother was dishing it right back out. The thought of sleeping was completely gone. I just lay in my bed and listened, staring at the ceiling. I heard my sister turn in her bed. I looked across the room. Her bed was right under the window and I could see her lying there.

I knew she was awake, even though she had herself curled up in a ball facing towards the wall. I knew my brother was awake too, he never went to sleep. Something crashed from inside the room. I jumped and turned away from the door, now I was facing the wall. Tears started to form in my eyes. I started to play with a crack in the wall. Tracing it up and down with my finger as the fight became louder and louder. I wished I could just climb inside and hide, go to a place where I didn't have to hear all the yelling, all the noise.

Another bang and light filled up the wall from the hallway. The door flew open,

"Stop it, Jim! What the Hell are you thinking?"

I didn't want to look. I didn't want to take the chance of them knowing I was awake. However, I turned around as quietly as I could, keeping my eyes closed the whole time, pretending I was just tossing in bed completely unaware of the calamity twelve feet away.

I wonder now if they even thought about us in that moment, thought about the example they were setting for my sister who was eight, and me eleven, as they put images into our heads that we will never be able to forget. Parents should show their children how to act, but I was unfortunate enough to be shown how not to act. It just took a decade or so to realize that I didn't have to repeat their mistakes, that I could learn from the ridiculous fighting and violence, and my life would go on just fine.

When I opened my eyes I saw my mom for the first time. She was on the floor against the wall across from their bedroom door. I could see her bare legs, and the bottom of the shirt she was sleeping in. She yelled back at my father with more fear than anger. This was the first time I had actually seen them fighting.

I had seen them get upset with each other, I heard the yelling and banging before, but never had I seen the action. It was always a mystery behind closed doors, the way I liked it. I could tell this was different, we all could. My sister's ball had become tighter; I could hear tiny sobs squeak out but she would bring them back in just as fast.

My father came into view in the doorframe, shirtless, his face red, eyes fixed on my mother like an angry dog. I shut my eyes as tight as I could and tears squeezed out between the cracks of my eyelids. I was afraid. I was afraid he would come into our room. I was afraid he would hurt my mom. I was afraid that if he did, I wouldn't see him again.

Everything is different now. We all know

about the past, we all know what it was like, but no one can or will acknowledge it. It's like the dishes in the back of the Cabinet. You see them every time you go to grab a plate or a bowl, but you never quite make it back to them. Then, the one time you need it you find that it reeks of mildew and dust, or at some point in the past a rodent had used it as a bathroom. It's hard to think back and remember what I tried so hard to forget. To think back to when I was an eleven year old boy scared out of his mind, wondering how far this will go, how long it will last, if it will still be ok in the morning.

This was the first and only time I had ever seen my dad hit my mom. Between having tears in my eyes and only peeking out the tiniest space between my eyelids it was hard to tell what had happened. All I knew was one minute my mother was back up shouting in the doorway at my dad, and the next she was on the ground, her back against the door frame looking up at him crying and yelling. He didn't seem to care; actually, it seemed to upset him even more. The whole house was buzzing. I was completely terrified, and knew this time it had gone too far.

"Brad! Brad!" my mother yelled from the floor in between sobs, "Brad, help me!"

I heard Brad open his door, but he didn't say anything. In an instant my father's attention moved from my mother and onto him. Now I couldn't watch. I dug my head into the pillow and cried and listened. I wondered what my brother thought he could do. He was a shy sixteen year old and I knew he was just as afraid of my father as I was. I didn't bring my head up from my pillow until it all ended, so I don't know where the phone came from or who had grabbed it. All I heard was my mother say, "Brad, call the police," and then my father challenging him to do it. "Go ahead! You're a big boy!" I think my brother must have been frozen or maybe he didn't even have the phone yet. I heard a loud crash and the sound of several things bouncing on the floor. My father had grabbed the phone and thrown it at the wall.

In the next minute it would all be over, but I don't think a minute ever took so long. I thought my family was about to be destroyed. I was so helpless and scared. I didn't know what was going to happen. Tomorrow, I thought, everything wasn't going to be ok. My dad made his final insults and comments, and then as suddenly as it began, it ended. I heard him walking to the door then out into the driveway. I heard all the doors slamming behind him as he went. I heard the car start, and then drive away. I heard my mother tell my brother to go to bed, and I heard her crying. I lay there wondering if I was ever going to see my father again. I knew that tomorrow we were not going to go to the reunion.

The next morning I woke up and didn't want to get out of bed. I didn't want to know if my dad had come back or not. I didn't want to face any awkward moments, I didn't want to hear the excuses, or I'm sorry. I finally did get out of bed to find

that my dad had come home. We didn't go to the reunion, and nobody mentioned the night before. My mother didn't come out of her room at all the next day. None of us really did. Again I was forced to realize everything was back to normal, and nothing ever changed. Looking back I wish I was old enough to say something. I was old enough to realize how horrible the night before was, but not old enough, confident enough to speak up and say this is wrong, it needs to stop.

A few years later we moved into a new house. This was the most peaceful time in my parent's marriage that I can remember. Not because they fought less, but because this house was big enough that I didn't hear it. My room was downstairs and they were upstairs and I was grateful for that. One night, after a fight which I don't remember hearing, my mom had me and my sister pack a bag and drove us to a motel for the night.

I remember the car ride. It was late; late enough that I couldn't comprehend what exactly was happening. I was frustrated with my mother. I didn't understand why she would make me leave my bed to stay at a motel. I was tired, frightened, and just wanted to go home. I asked her why we were even taking the trouble. "Nothing ever changes," I said, "tomorrow everything will be back to normal." It turned out that this statement made it clear to my mom that this time something had to change.

I never felt bad about my parents getting a divorce. In fact, when I was told it was a relief, it was hard to resist saying, "finally" or "about time." I remember my Dad coming into my room and calmly telling me to sit down. This was possibly the most frightening and emotional moment of the conversation. Why would he come into my room to talk and be calm? That never happened. I was running the possibilities through my brain. Did my teacher call home? Did I forget to do a chore? What did I do this time? I listened to his calm and pensive voice, qualities that I never associated with him. He told me he loved me, and that he had something important to talk to me about. I started to wonder at that point. Is it finally time? Is he about to tell me that he loves my mother very much but sometimes people are better as friends? I had played this conversation over in my head for years and now, I thought, it has finally come.

"Me and your Mom love each other very much, we always will." I was right, I thought, as he continued on, "You need to understand that, and remember that, and just know that nothing is going to change between us, ok?"

My gaze went from his blue eyes, which I was always too afraid to look directly into, and back to the wall behind him. "Ok…So?" I said, just wanting to hear him say it. It is not very often my Dad can't find the words he wants to say. I understand now why it was so difficult. He really did love my Mom, and she loved him. To walk away from that, and almost twenty years of marriage, couldn't be easy, even when that choice was obvious.

"I'm going to be moving out. Now nothing is final, we are not getting divorced yet, but we need to take some time apart. It's not your fault…" Ugh, I thought, I know it isn't my fault. It's yours. "So don't think that."

"Don't worry, Dad, I know," I said.

"Ok, good."

"Alright," I breathed out as my chest and posture deflated.

I'm not sad, and it was weird. My dad just told me he is moving out and my parents are getting separated, but I don't feel sad. How can that be? Should I fake it? I don't want him to think I'm happy. Oh no…am I happy? I guess part of me is. I won't have to deal with all the fights, the yelling, the crashing, and the noise. Maybe things will calm down, maybe he will be happier. I know mom will be happier. But why am I not sad!? I don't want Dad to go, I still want to see him. I know I will, heck, maybe even more. So I guess that's it. I'm not sad, because this is a good thing. It's a good thing my parents are getting divorced.

"Are you alright?" my Dad asked, as he looked at me. My legs were now up on the bed, my elbows resting on my knees, and my hands on my face.

"Ya, I'm fine. It's just weird, ya know? But I'm fine. I know it will all be ok, maybe better, right? That's the point?"

"I suppose that's the point," he said a little more quietly.

My father moved out a few days later. I don't really remember him leaving. I don't remember how I felt. However, I do know that once he left things seemed better. I went to bed without keeping my ears open for rising voices. I didn't have to be on edge once he came home from work. I didn't have to worry that he had a bad day and was angry with the world and everyone in it. I didn't have to wonder how long he would be out, and when he came home, how drunk he would be. My mom seemed happier. She started to go out more and was around a lot less. I suppose that she just wanted to enjoy herself, maybe try and figure out who this new woman was, but I remember it being a lonely time. My brother was away at school, my sister and I didn't get along, and I had few friends. But things were still better than before.

I always look at this time and wonder. I tell myself I will learn from his mistakes, and I won't repeat them. I love my father and I'm happy I'm his son, but I don't want to be like him. I want to be able to control the emotions inside me. I don't want to force people to suffer if I am. I don't want to resort to intimidation and fear to solve my problems. The story of his life could fill a novel, but that doesn't come close to making what he did that night ok. His father never was there for him, so he never learned how to be a husband or a father. I can forgive him, and I have, but that doesn't mean that I will forget.

I always wonder if I'm falling into the same holes he did, but realizing I'm falling makes it easier to grab onto the edge and pull myself up. I will, and

have, learned from his mistakes. He may not have taught me everything he could, but he did teach me a lot about how not to act. The problem is when that's all you know it's so easy to be caught getting angry over little things, arguing over nothing, or just not caring. §

Northward Bound

Myrna Rodriguez

I guess it's kind of crazy the things people will do after being cramped up all winter long fending off that bone-piercing Chicago chill. You're trapped inside the same four walls, flipping through a few channels of mindless television selling the same stupid shows day after day after day. The only escape from that horrid monotony was being hindered by bitter cold and many layers of clothing. Human hibernation is how I see it, this hiding from the cold without the long sleep that would dream us through these dreary months. The dark, heavy cloud of the season was weighing heavy on my soul; S.A.D. was fully in control. I had to get away.

Who wouldn't want to run away, bail on that cold, hard, cement covered world? Leave the cooped-up insanity behind and stretch their legs on some wooded piece of Mother Nature's majesty. I know I would and my friend, feeling just like me, agreed. We would leave the lovely city we called home, even if just for a few quick days. We would run away and shake out our winter weary bones.

We pulled out the worn, well-wandered atlas. Yes, I said atlas. People actually used maps to navigate way back then. GPS technology was still unused by the masses. We estimated gas and food because, well, we were broke. Of course we were broke. My friend and I were a very young 20ish, just starting to conquer the world, living on our own, partying, and working shitty jobs. Hence, we were broke. So gas was an issue. She was an old gas guzzling van that had her limits. Closely calculating our driving hours, since we didn't have much time, my friend and I pooled our cash on the table, and determined the best place to go.

Preparing our trusty old steed was easy enough. We packed lots and lots of blankets, all that we could find, and a couple of sleeping bags. Some long wooden planks to run along the inside of the van's back bed would cover the holes and stabilize it. She was rough to handle doing 65 with the wind rushing up her ass-end. I did say she was old, right? The odometer's dial was frozen at some 250,000 miles. But we drove that old girl for at least 100,000 more. She was a good ole Dodge, built to last.

Finally free, on the road, our sticker encrusted boom box perched between the seats blaring R.E.M., the Dead, Floyd, Melissa, Chili Peppers, who knows; probably all of the above several times over and many more in between. The radio worked but it didn't have a cassette player. 94North to Milwaukee, here we come. North, not only to Milwaukee but beyond, on 43 to Green Bay, and then beyond on 41to Menominee, then beyond, up Hwy35 into the Hiawatha National Forest of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Ah, fresh air. We couldn't help but cough out the putrid city exhaust as we breathed in this deep, fresh, earthy clean magnificence. A smell unlike any other, made pungent and crisp in the bitter North-

ern Michigan bite. It was, after all, late March, just the beginning of spring in Chicago, but still deep within winter's bitter grasp way up north, where we chose to stretch our winter weary legs. Most would have never looked north and taken the southerly route instead. We, mighty adventurers, journeyed north, to where there are more trees than people, where life is still wild, and very, very cold. We escaped to the northernmost point of our beloved Lake Michigan.

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And there I lay, nestled in nature's embrace, exhausted from a marathon drive, high off exhaust fumes from the idling van, and probably the joint I'd smoked, staring at the most intoxicating view of the northern sky. Tiny, shimmering beacons of many sizes monopolized my gaze. Millions upon millions of them hypnotized me with their never-ending expanse, broken only by a sea of white that commanded its way through their brilliance. Never before had I seen such a show. Not like that, not for real, only in pictures had I been privy to anything so beautiful. I was in love, in awe. The cold mattered no longer. I understood why I was there. I needed to see those stars like I saw them that night, freezing, sleeping in a van out in nowheresville Michigan at the end of March.

Happy, relaxed, and amazingly warm under my mountain of blankets, I must have drifted off into a peaceful slumber. I was in that nice sleeping place, warm, toasty, comfortable, when rudely awoken by a frigid trail of water dribbling slowly down my cheek, onto my neck. Damn, was it raining in the van? No, the roof was probably the only piece of solid metal on that old girl. The problem lay in the battle of warm breath versus cold winter air. A pool of condensation had developed, rather thickly, on my blanket, above my head. It had meandered its way, as all water does, down a tiny crease in my cocoon, to a precise location just below my cheek, which gave quick access to a nice warm spot on my neck, and sent shivers through my body. Good morning, Northern Michigan.

A good morning it was, crisp and clear. It was early, very early. The sun was just awakening, announcing the new day through the bare expanse of trees adorning the eastern horizon. Frost in crazy, abstract patterns along the windshield lay awaiting the warm morning rays. I lay inside the idling van, cocooned once again, waiting for the heat to kick in as my friend stirred underneath her disheveled pile of blankets.

A walk, we decided after she woke up. That's what we would do. The best way to shake off the morning's cold was to take a nice long walk in the frigid Northern Michigan spring air. Why not? It sounded like a good idea at the time. The sun was rising higher, though not yet warmer. As if preparing for battle, we armed ourselves for the cold with layers upon layers of clothing and warmed our hands, and bellies, on some hot, not so tasty, gas station java.

Driving around, just a few die-hard locals were all we saw. I bet they wondered what the hell two young girls with out of state tags were doing up there that early in the season. I didn't wonder. I was in sync with the elements around me. I was cool with the cold. We had made our peace the night before under those glorious stars. If I had only been able to convince my cold fingers and toes of this, that morning would have been simply perfect.

There are lots of trail heads in the State Parks, and Hiawatha was no exception. But we followed our instincts, or we followed something, and found ourselves one hell of a trail. Frost melted as its cold fought a losing battle against the morning sun's rays, which created a dense, white haze throughout the woodlands surrounding us. It was somewhat surreal. Together, my friend and I ambled our way down a woodchip trail into those quiet, waking woods.

Dormant trees stood solidly as far as my eyes could see, providing a canopy of barren branches where leaves should have been. It was serene. Those same leaves, a brownish-grey carpet on the ground, held puddles of melting frost shimmering on their winter-worn discarded skins. Our trail led to a boardwalk, which wound away through the winter-dried wetlands it traversed. It too was covered with the remnants of the cold night's frost, weathered brown and grey, just like the woods it slithered through and the discarded leaves lying scattered about.

Hypnotized is what I was. It was so quiet, so calm. Yes, it was cold, but it didn't matter. I felt as if the world's energy was slowly arising out of everything around me, running through me, enveloping me, making me one with it; a symbiotic dance with my soul. A twig snapped in the distance and I smiled, thinking of some cute little forest creature waking and searching for his morning grub. Another snap and I thought he must have caught something. Ah, nature is a wondrous thing and we were in the middle of it, communing with it. In my happy daze, I rounded the bend, looked forward, and stopped dead as my heart skipped a very large beat.

I was frozen. A shriek of panic stretched from my toes all the way to my ears. My friend, lost in her own amazement, walked right into my back. It was something you see in cartoons, the first person stops and everyone else walks right into them. Rather comical under most circumstances, but I didn't notice at the time. My friend, you see, was much shorter than I and couldn't see ahead. She couldn't see why all the hair on my body had stood straight up. She couldn't see why the calmness that I exuded just seconds before had turned into rigidity and fear.

My ears rang from the rush of adrenaline flowing through my veins. It was so loud I didn't hear the question at first. There was a poke in my back. "What's up?" she asked. My body ached as I fought to keep it still and not run away. I couldn't

speak. I fought not to look up. "Bear," I managed to whisper.

"Did you say bear?" she said quietly. Unbelieving and nervously, I felt her raise to look over my shoulder. Just as quickly, she hid herself as far into my back as she could, saying "Oh shit! What do we do?" I could not answer her, for I did not know. I couldn't think.

About 10 yards ahead of me on that peaceful woodland boardwalk was a fine example of a cute furry creature waking to find his morning grub. Little had I known that I might have been that grub, for 10 yards ahead of me was one of North America's finest, and largest, wild hunters—a brown bear. And he was stopped, checking me out, nothing between us but 10 yards of panic warmed air. No zoo enclosures or boundaries, no zookeeper to save me, no cell phone to call for help. It was just me, my friend, and a bear on a boardwalk out in the middle of nowheresville Northern Michigan.

All sorts of bear attack stories began to replay through my head. You know, the ones you see in those dramatic media pieces. Don't run, they will only chase you. Don't look them in the eyes, it's a sign of aggression. Don't fight them if they attack, lie down and play dead and they will leave you alone. I don't think I ever believed that one, but I guess I was ready to test the theory if no other choice had presented itself.

He was beautiful, this bear. I chanced a sideways glance at him. He stood there looking as surprised to see us as we were him. I took that as a bad sign. He was sizing us up, sniffing my fear in the air and raising his left paw in our direction. I took that as a bad sign too. Was that a challenge or a warning? I was lost on what to do. I didn't want to piss him off. That was his territory, after all. He wasn't the biggest bear I'd ever seen, but what the hell did I know. He was wild, not a tamed zoo animal, and he was a lot bigger than I was. He stood chest high on all fours, different shades of brown around his face, and he looked like he could use a good brushing. Then again, he had just woken up, probably not long out of hibernation.

Again, I felt a poke to my back. "We should run," she said.

"You run. I will go the other way when he chases you," I whispered.

"That's not funny," she replied. "What do we do?"

I didn't know what to do. I couldn't get my mind to think. I never took my sideways glance off him, and he returned the gesture directly. I was in awe of him as he stood there. I realized that I was standing face to face with my judge, my jury. He had the power to decide my fate that day, this wild brown bear. He had the power to find me guilty of some crime against his laws. He had the power to end my day for intruding on the beginning of his. Then again, we could have been thinking the same thing. He could have been readying to defend himself if I tried to hurt him. Either way, I was screwed.

I tried to prepare for the worst as my body ached from its rigidity. I'd swear that bear could hear the jackhammer in my chest, the swish of my blood racing through my veins. I knew he could smell my fear. I could smell it on myself, oozing from my pores, wafting its way to him across our 10-yard expanse. I was too young to die, but if that was to be my fate, then at least the scenery was nice. They say everything is "location, location, location." Well that one worked for me. I would have rather died by bear paw in the wild than in a tin can on the road or by a bullet from some stupid kid on the city streets.

But I didn't die, obviously. I didn't get maimed either, nor did my friend. For whatever reason, that scruffy-looking brown bear didn't see the need to mess with us on that cold morning. Perhaps he found us unappetizing. Perhaps he had already feasted and was too bloated to bother. Perhaps, just perhaps, he found us intimidating with our tie-dyed, patchouli-smelling clothes, hot coffee, and fear.

Whatever the case was, he graced us with a few guttural bear noises, perhaps telling us a thing or two about intruding in his morning routine, but no growls, no teeth, and no claws; we received a pardon from the morning bear's court. Then this large, brown bear, this wild hunter, slowly turned and began to wander away, stopping every few steps and looking back. I didn't move. She didn't move. "What do we do now," she asked.

"Let him get farther. Don't move," was my only response.

Our 10 yards of boardwalk had turned into 10 yards of woodland, then 15 yards, then 20. He was deeper in the woods and didn't seem to care about us anymore. The threat of painful death disappeared with each step that bear took deeper into those woods. I was in shock; my eyes never left his shrinking figure. My jackhammer slowed, as did the rushing blood. My body relaxed, shaking from the pent up adrenaline. My legs began to feel like they could move. I gave him about 30 yards and suggested we go, slowly.

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We found the northernmost point of Lake Michigan, as we had planned. It was as lovely as I hoped. Flat, rocky shores, smoothed by the deep, dark, cold lake waters, lay as far as I could see. No houses, no people, no bear to be found. I made my peace with Mother Nature that day. Her appointed judge had pardoned me, or perhaps he welcomed me to their world. Either way, the symbiotic energy we shared was intensified to a level I'd never experienced before. It was amazing. Perhaps it was that energy that saved me to begin with. It was the most real thing I had felt in a very long time.

At some point we made our way back home. Our trusty old steed rolled us across Hwy2 to Mackinaw City and some magnificent fudge, south on 75 to Houghton Lake, south on 127 to Lansing, south on 69 to Battle Creek, finally, west on Hwy94

past Benton Harbor, through Indiana, and back to our sweet home Chicago.

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We went back to our lives, my friend and I, back to the normal routine. I don't know what she remembers of that day, of the bear. I don't know if she saw him like I did. She was, after all, hiding in my back. We logged many more woodland miles together never seeing another wild bear. I hope she still remembers him as I do.

I do know that I faced ole Grim that day, in his bear disguise. He waved his paw, granting me an extension on my life. Perhaps it was just a chance meeting on his way to claim another lost soul. Perhaps he was letting me know I was being watched. Maybe that's what the bear grumbled to me before he left, a warning to get back on track. Either way, he changed my life.

I looked at things differently for a long time after that trip. I suppose I still do now. After 20 years, the different perspectives you pick up along the way kind of stick. I wonder how many games my mind has played with those aging memories: the stars, the cold, and the early morning scruffy bear. I wonder how much about that marvelous trip I forgot along the way. It's funny the games that time can play with our minds.

I think about that bear from time to time. I wonder if he lived a full life and hope he did. I wonder if he ever met other early morning wanderers along his path and hope he found them worthy too. Most people don't believe me when I tell my tale, but I don't care. I know it's true. I know he was real. I know I came face to face with a wild bear in the cold northern woods of Michigan, and lived to breathe another day. §

Worlds in My Head

Catherine Vlahos

Recess in elementary school was always a fun time for me. Now, when I say I had fun during recess, I mean not in the way a majority of the people around me did. I loathed (and still do) any form of sports, so I was apathetic towards the mad riots surrounding the coveted four-square courts and basketball bins. My true love was for the playground, and not just because I liked to climb.

For me and my best friend, the dingy, kid-safe staircase led not to a shaky bridge that irritating kids jumped on to make noise, but to another world. This imaginary world was creatively named "Waterfall," and that was the name of the game, too. My friend and I loved it there. Every time we'd pass through the portal, the stairs would transport us to a different world; the plastic climbing ropes spontaneously melted away because we were in the "Slime World," the slide that always felt like it electrocuted you when you touched the ground appropriately became "Shockwave Falls."

I felt untouchable when we entered Waterfall because we gave ourselves superpowers, and I did not feel alone because we created creatures to befriend. Not many people understood this place we spoke of, or how to get to it. It took imagination and a yearning to create something instead of accepting what was in front of you, and it soon became clear to me that this was not common. I remember one particular time when I was soaring through the air on the back of my giant bird beast while my friend was swimming through the icy ocean below atop her seal companion. The tower that held the secret cure for the deadly Shockwave Fever loomed over the horizon when we suddenly heard a voice call out to us.

"Hey." My feet plunged into the flat and dusty grass of the playground, and a flood of noises from ordinary life came rushing back to me. My friend and I looked at a girl from our class who had been watching us running around in a field yelling about cures and flapping our hands. "What are you doing?" she asked, her face twisted like she had sucked on a lemon.

My friend and I exchanged glances, unsure of what to say. It all felt so silly suddenly. There were regular things staring at me like chain-link fences and deflated kickballs and ratty, primary colored sweaters. I tried to search for the right words. What were we doing? "Um, we're just…playing a game."

She looked at us skeptically; we had no equipment, no ropes, no basketballs, no hula hoops, we were just two kids standing there. "What's it called?"

My friend answered quietly, "Uh, it's called Waterfall…it's like…this world that we made up."

The girl blinked. "Can I play?" she asked, her face still doubtful.

No one but us had ever entered Waterfall; we didn't know if it was possible. "Sure," I said, not wanting to be rude. "Right now we're going to the

Ice Tower to get the secret cure for Shockwave Fever." Suddenly the mundane suburban landscape faded back to the turbulent, slate waters of the raging sea, and my great bird released a screech like a hawk. "Let's go, we're almost there!"

My friend below me called out through the spray of the waves, "I can see it ahead! We need to hurry!"

We turned to the newcomer, who stood on a flat, dusty field. "Uh…" she started. "Yeah. Let's go." She half-heartedly ran with us, somehow unaffected by the roaring waters that hindered our journey. We continued to call out commands to our creatures and fight against the storm while the other girl slowly walked along the grass, looking at the ground awkwardly. While she tepidly trailed a few feet behind us, it was clear that we were universes apart. "Um, never mind, I don't want to play anymore," she suddenly said, walking away to wait in line to play four-square. We looked at each other and shrugged. This was our world, somewhere that not just anyone could enter and experience.

. . .

Another day, perhaps even another year, something was different. I stared blankly at the barren spread of woodchips before us. Something was not only different, it was wrong. "Where is the staircase?" my friend said quietly in disbelief. The staircase, along with an entire half a playground, was gone. Our entrance to Waterfall suddenly disappeared.

Neither of us knew what this meant for our world. "I dunno…it's like it was never there." Those words ached coming from my mouth. Like it was never there. It was never there. My face was still as I gazed at the woodchips, like a dead fish. My eyes were wide open, but I wasn't really seeing anything. We both stood there silently, unsure of what to do. "I guess they're redoing the playground or something," I offered, my mouth dry.

My friend continued to stare ahead of her into the empty space. "Oh," she replied distractedly. It seemed like a simple enough answer, but it wasn't. They weren't just redoing a dirty playground, they were redoing our world. A whole world with magic and creatures and good and evil was wiped away and they didn't even notice. It hurt. It made me feel stupid. It made me feel like I should just go stand in line to play four-square.

"So…what d'you wanna do?" I looked to my friend, her expression blank and still focused on the woodchips.

I shifted my gaze to the rest of the playground, and I watched the lines for the four-square courts and the basketballs and the hula hoops endlessly snake around the blacktop. We could go to them, I thought as other kids zoomed past us like brightly-colored bugs. I glanced at the mulch again, then to the other two jungle gyms that remained. I blinked, and it then became clear to me what had happened.

"Oh no!" I cried out suddenly, making my friend jump. "Michelle, the Magic Staircase is

gone!"

Michelle looked at me unenthusiastically. "Yeah, I know…" she started.

"No, you don't get it!" I explained quickly, grinning with a newfound understanding. "Someone doesn't want us getting in Waterfall. Someone from the inside doesn't want us to mess up their plans…something really bad must be going on!"

Michelle's eyes widened. "You're right! It must be a curse!" She closed her eyes as if she was concentrating very intently. "I can't hear Slick or Paridie…they cut us off from our animal companions, too."

"This is serious. We need to find another way into Waterfall, before it's too late," I said gravely, and we took off to explore the rest of the playground, the woodchips flying from our feet. It all worked out; we eventually figured out that some creature had escaped through the portal we used to travel to Waterfall and was causing trouble in the real world. I think it was hiding in the bin of basketballs. Since we were cut off from our powers, we ended up trapping it with some hula hoops and ordered it to create a new portal for us.

I grinned as I felt the cool, misty air that permeated the Deep Forest against my face. Michelle walked beside me, holding up a small lantern to guide our way through the giant, ancient trees. I knew at that moment that nothing could take away Waterfall from us, that it wasn't just about a playground, but about the world that lived inside our heads.

While we stopped going to Waterfall once middle school began, I realized that some aspects of it remained with me. I kept up my passion and inclination to create and invent stories while the real world turned around me. I focused on fiction and characters and plots with more energy than the kids passing me in the halls who gossiped about having boyfriends or curling hair.

Even now I find myself daydreaming and doodling on the side of my notes everyday, for better or for worse. Adventuring in Waterfall made me realize how important this desire was in my life, this desire to tell stories and imagine situations and create the images I saw in my head. I don't know if I would have won art competitions if I didn't follow this urge, or if I would have decided to play the flute, or if I would have wanted to tell the story of marching band through video. My love of drawing has always been present in my life; I can't remember a time when I didn't make pictures of birds, or my family, or characters on TV. However, I do remember I yearned to play the flute because I wanted to make songs that sounded like birds. Like the stories and pictures that swam around in my head, I always had a melody or a feeling that I wanted to play on my flute.

However, all of my passions and ideas would remain locked in my head if it weren't for this overpowering drive I have to bring them into the world. The motivation and determination to make what-

Photography at Its Finest

Elizabeth Likens

Snap 1.

Another photo not perfect. Someone really needs to invest in that program that can edit and fix everyone to look perfect in the photo. Twelve people are too many to get it right, no matter the amount of tries. I wish my Aunt Carol realized this when she insisted on taking a family photo. It's a ridiculous process. Especially when trying to gather our family in particular in front of the reception hall stairs before dinner, and it isn't like the reception hall serves as a gorgeous backdrop.

The double, white doors that lead into the hall have chipped paint and are as plain as could be. The cement blocks of the building look centuries old while the cement stairs are dull and worn from weather and time. As I stand in front of the hall at my wit's end, I slowly realize why I rarely spent time with my dad's side of the family. Everything about them screams "ridiculous" and "frustrating." They're lucky it is my Aunt Krista's wedding. But it doesn't change the fact that I still hate family weddings for this reason—the stupid photo shoots.

"Where is Spenser and Alex?" my aunt questions, searching the group for her two boys. They really aren't hard to miss. They're both 6'5 and tower over everyone in the family so it is nearly impossible to imagine them being difficult to find.

But of course they're missing, and I know exactly what they're up to -- a run to the liquor store. I don' know what it is with my family and their obsessio with alcohol. My aunt and her new husband are al ready wobbling around at the foot of the hall stairs tempers flaring for no apparent reason beyond th fact that they're trashed before the reception dinne begins. My dad is on the same path to being too in toxicated to even walk properly and my three mal cousins are cunningly investing money to get chea liquor. Thank goodness Brooklyn isn't like her old er brothers. Because let's be honest, by eight o'cloc tonight a majority of my family members won' be able to construct a coherent, simple sentence

I peer around Brooklyn, my cousin, who is signif icantly taller at 5'11 over my 5'2 height, and notic my once two missing cousins walking towards us Alex is holding a brown paper bag in his right hand gripping it tightly as Spenser walks alongside him carrying on a conversation about how they are go ing stash the alcohol before their parents find out

"Spenser! Alex! Will you get over here for thi dumb picture?" Alex can tell I am aggravated. H quickly throws the bottle-shaped paper bag in th nearby bushes that are growing rather closely to th building wall, its greenery beginning to creep up ward on the brick. With the alcohol safely hidden they jog towards the reception hall steps, the famil already impatient. They join the picture by squeez ing in between their siblings, Josh and Brooklyn immediately smiling for the picture as if they ha been present the entire time.

ever creative challenge I face work is a quality that adventuring in Waterfall also revealed to me. When the playground we used to enter Waterfall disappeared, instead of giving up, I decided that this setback would be part of our story. Looking back, I realize that I was so determined to keep the idea of Waterfall alive and breathing in our real world that I made up something we never did before. I also realized just last year that if I didn't have this desire to make things happen despite the odds, I would never have finished making the massive one hour video documenting my high school's marching band through their season.

I hope that my lessons I learned in Waterfall will continue to apply to my future as well, because I hope to complete a graphic novel with one of my closest friends. Playing in Waterfall taught me that I will always have a world in my head that needs to be released. §

Photo: Krista Thompson

Snap 2.

We finally have Alex and Spenser there, but now we need to find my grandma. She was just here. How far could she have really gone? I watch my aunt flailing her arms around in frustration, freaking out that her mom isn't present for the photo. There is no way my aunt is going to let my grandma go missing for the family photo when she is the reason my aunt's wedding date was moved up. My grandma is not physically doing well; she is suffering from cirrhosis of the liver due to her past excessive drinking habits. It probably didn't help that she smoked a majority of her life either.

"Oh, there she is!" my brother exclaims, just as anxious to be done with these pictures.

She looks gorgeous in her black, knee length dress, but the obvious is still there -- she isn't going to make it much longer. Her feet are slightly dragging while she makes her way down the sidewalk, my sister Bianca linking arms with hers to steady her balance. It is hard to imagine that a few months ago she had the stride of a twenty year-old. Now, her skin is tinged yellow and her frailties exposed by her skeletal build. Her eyes are not filled with as much life, her smile almost painful in the picture. My sister is practically holding her up in the picture which contrasted to her function in the family. My grandma was the person who kept the peace in our family; she was the glue that ensured we acted as a family should. Her important place in the family will become obvious when she passes away two months later. My aunt and my father will resent one another again, severing the family ties between my cousins and me.

Snap 3.

"Where is dad?" I question Bianca, my sister, who is still supporting my grandma's weight.

"I don't know. I'll go look inside." My sister looks to my cousin Brooklyn to hold up my grandma. Acknowledging my sister's request, Brooklyn replaces my sister's spot at my grandma's side as Bianca walks inside in search of my father. Later after my Aunt Krista's wedding, I will find it ironic that it was my sister who offered to locate our father because she will decide she can move out at 18 with her boyfriend. My father, livid about her actions, will call to express his opinion about her absurd decision. It won't be only my father who will find her new found independence ridiculous because my mother and I will be pointing out her obvious lack of intelligence. Her "mature" response to anyone who will oppose her outrageous decisions: "Eff off." The wedding will be the last time my father and sister talk before he will pass away, six months after my grandma.

My sister approaches from the reception hall with my dad right behind her. He looks handsome dressed up in his black suit, but he always ruins his outfits with his stupid prescription sunglasses. Every time we do anything, even in the dark, he insisted upon wearing his sunglasses. When I finally see him standing next to my aunt for the photo-

graph, those hideous sunglasses are resting atop his shaved head. The family always teased him about his shaved head because he was convinced he could do it himself. Yeah, right. As I am standing at the top of the stairs, I can see where he missed a patch of hair. At least the patch is on the back of his head this time as opposed to the top where Aunt Carol can capture his terrible shaving abilities in the family wedding picture.

"Ray, take those glasses off your head," my aunt firmly commands. He does so, placing the glasses in his right suit jacket pocket.

My dad looks ecstatic, his smile spread wide across his face. He clings to his sister in the picture, but it contradicted the actual relationship they had prior to the wedding. My dad was on non-speaking terms with my aunt. For what reason this time, I could never keep track, but I knew it was my grandma who persuaded my father to attend his sister's wedding.

"Dad, will you stop dancing and take the picture!" I exclaim irritated that my dad is no longer smiling for the camera, but attempting to shuffle his feet to a rhythm no one could hear but himself. He quickly glances my way, smiles sheepishly, and poses next to his sister once again, his right arm casually resting on my Aunt Krista's bare shoulder. *Snap 4.*

"Ethan!" Donnie, my Aunt Krista's new husband, booms. His little boy is playing on the sidewalk, finding a productive way to spend his time while waiting for the family to assemble themselves. He has the right idea. Stray away from the pack until summoned. I always knew little kids were more intelligent than adults. Why didn't I think of wondering off?

Knowing already at a young age that his father was not a force to be reckoned with when he was drunk, Ethan quickly runs towards his father. He stands in front of his stepmom and dad, Donnie's hand resting firmly on top of Ethan's right shoulder. Oh, I failed to mention that my dad's family is known for more than just being extreme alcoholics. They are renowned for quick marriages and even quicker divorces.

Six months after the wedding, they will already be discussing divorce. It should be obvious from the beginning that my aunt's marriage wouldn't last long. Her severe drinking problem destroyed anything good she tried to build in her life. My aunt will begin to drink heavily after the passing of my grandma. Her future decision to increase her alcohol consumption didn't mask the fact that she already had a drinking problem prior to the situation, but it will worsen. Immensely. Donnie won't be able to take the burden of dealing with my aunt and her problems so he will make the only logical decision he can -- get the hell out while he still can.

Truthfully, I would have done the same thing. *Snap 5.*

"Wait. Spenser is missing!" Alex, my cousin, realizes as he looks about the group.

"Go find him!" my aunt yells, irritated due to the alcohol rather than the actual situation.

"I'll find him, Mom," Josh, Alex's twin and my cousin, says. He pushes through the family barrier we are creating on the hall stairs for the picture to look for Spenser in the reception hall. It is the second time Spenser has decided to go missing in action. First for alcohol and now, I am sure, for food. As I am impatiently waiting for Josh to return with his brother, I am strongly contemplating throwing my heels at Spenser. However, I would rather him be missing than where he will be in the future. Shortly after my father will die, a month later I will be at the same funeral home congregating with the same family members for another family death. Spenser will die as another teenage statistic who commits suicide, and another family member will be nixed from the picture. I would have never imagined attending my fifteen year-old cousin's funeral.

"Finally! Where did you go now, Spence?" I ask, knowing full well where he ran off too. I could see him chewing on whatever he shoved into his mouth at the last second. I shake my head in frustration, hiding a smile that is trying to emerge on my lips.

He squeezes in next to his brother Josh and me, his smile wide once he swallows whatever he is eating. I would have never guessed that he was depressed. His smile will fool everyone, including the family with him in the picture.

Snap 6.

"A keeper, everyone!" my Aunt Carol, the family photography, happily says as she checks the picture on the screen of the digital camera.

Finally! Getting to one perfect family photograph took forever. I was getting irritated waiting for everyone to gather for a flippin' picture. Like I tried to tell my family prior to the picture, twelve people is way too many people to gather because no one is ever around when you need them. However, I will be kind of glad that I put up with the ridiculous antics my family pulled. As much as the time seemed to not matter before, I will give anything to relive it again.

I will hold this picture between my fingers and stare longingly at it, wondering how a few months could change my entire life. My four cousins, Josh, Alex, Spenser, and Brooklyn are at the top left of the stairs, huddling together, their faces beaming with happiness. Josh is in the middle, his arms draped casually over Spenser and Alex's shoulders in an effort to pull them in while Brooklyn stands in front of all three boys. Brooklyn looks absolutely stunning in her apple red dress while my three cousins' black suits blend in together, their ties acting as the only differentiating feature. Josh and Alex are hunched over slightly because of their 6'7 height. It will always remind me of how difficult it was to embrace either of them because of my measly 5'2 height.

At the bottom left, in front of my four cousins, is my grandma and my sister. Similar to my male

cousins, the two of them are wearing black. However, they are sporting knee-length dresses. My sister's dress glitters with pink sparkles in contrast to my grandma's plain black one. My sister is on the far left with my grandma on the other side of her, my grandma's arm drawing my sister in for the picture. They are both awkwardly smiling for the camera, my sister's body being pulled closer to my grandma. I will always wonder why my sister was not near my brother and me for this picture.

Right next to my grandma and in the center of family picture is my Aunt Krista, her new husband, Donnie, and his son Ethan. Ethan is standing in front of his new set of parents, a smile nowhere to be found. Actually, he looks more pissed off than anything. My Aunt Krista's left hand is resting over Ethan's chest, hiding his black tie. He is dressed in a black suit as well, matching exactly with Donnie. Donnie wears more of a smirk than a smile, his arm wrapped around his new wife. I will have to pay close attention to detail in the photograph to notice this little detail. My Aunt Krista's smile is wide, her curvy figure exposed due to her white, mermaid style wedding dress. She is standing extremely straight, making her appear uncomfortable in the picture.

Next to my aunt is my dad, both his hands resting on my Aunt Krista's bare shoulders. He is leaning closely to her, his smile looking more drunk than genuine. His trademark sunglasses are missing from the top of his bald head. I will later remark to him about how it took more effort than necessary to have him take them off. He will smile and avoid my sarcastic statement like he always does. His silver, white, and black striped tie is hanging against his all black formal attire of dress pants and a dress shirt. He always loved black. It must have been the Harley Davidson lover in him.

Right above my father and at the top right corner of the picture, my brother and I are standing close together. My brother has his arm over my shoulders, his smile refusing to show any teeth. It looks more like he is pressing his lips together too tightly for comfort. He always hated showing his teeth in pictures because of his braces. I'm at my brother's right side, smiling my typical cheesy smile. Against all the black outfits in the picture, I am the only one wearing a dress full of numerous colors. Only a few years ago, I would have blended in perfectly. I loved wearing only black and I was pretty convinced no other color existed in the world, but I've grown up. I've realized that color is such an amazing thing, and that it will help shape the optimistic personality I seem to always have.

I will hold this picture in my hand and remember dancing with my family, specifically my father, and being aggravated that my family can't even get their act together for one family picture. Those few minutes on the broken, cracked cement stairs, moving closer together as my family smiled brightly for the camera was the last time we would ever be viewed as a tight-knit family.

Our family severed.

Snap 7. §

On Suicide

Lauren Schlipmann

There isn't a day that passes that I'm not thinking of you in some way. Mostly it's exactly that, the passing of days, that occupies my thoughts. You see, every day that goes by is one more day you retreat farther into my past. One more day since the last one that I heard your voice, saw you, or touched you. Another reminder that I'll never experience these things again.

It still crushes me, and pisses me off, that you did what you did. I hate you for giving up, giving in. But whatever lame gestures at hatred I make, they fade fast, filled with my imaginings of what your last minutes on Earth must have been. Sitting on cold ground, crying, resolute despite your wavering. Holding your gun. What were you thinking? Was there any glimmer of doubt, any moment of resistance? How long did you sit there? You must have been cold, so very cold. My mind allows me no mercy, playing with gruesome detail what must have come after: the gun blasting, your strong, young, lean body slumping over.

I think of everything I haven't done, that you won't see. You won't see me get my college degree. You won't see me get married. You won't see me have children, or buy my first house. You won't be there to see me, or her, through what's now happening, the slow and gradual dying of your mother. She'll be with you soon.

Somehow your cell phone is still in service. I don't know how this can be, so many months later. But it is. I call it a lot. Your voicemail answers. You sound short, yet upbeat. "Hello, this is Mark. Please leave a message and I'll call ya right back." But you won't of course. I listen to it often, usually when I need to cry over you, need to purge myself of thoughts of you. If you could check your phone from wherever you are, you would find 132 missed calls from Lauren. I miss you so much. So much that when I think the thought, "miss you," it seems so woefully inadequate of an expression that I well up with tears immediately. I ache for you. I feel a physical pain I can neither explain or remove. It's as though I had a limb severed and am experiencing phantom pains. There's nothing there, really. It's gone. But I still feel it. It's still there for me.

I miss my Bud. Who calls their Dad something like Bud? I don't even remember where I came up with it. I miss our long summers, in my awkward junior high school years, when I'd forget being a dork for a few hours while we threw the Mickey Mouse soft football around the yard. I still have it, you know that? It's on my dresser, next to your big obsidian ball, and the carefully worked sugilite and turquoise sailboat pendant you made. Your favorite piece.

You made the most amazing fires. I still remember you, when I was eleven years old or so,

crouched in front of the dusty, red, jagged brick hearth, carefully arranging kindling in the neatest triangular teepee shape I'd ever seen. Our old terrier Mim was always close at your elbow, monitoring your progress. Then you would get a stack of newspapers, and individually crumple each sheet, stuffing it around the teepee. Finally you'd strike a match, and light another piece of newspaper, and carefully hold the flame to your little creation, until it was steadily ablaze, adding progressively larger pieces to it as the flames grew and took root.

We never were a religious family. Even to this day I can't bring myself to align with any faith that, for the most part, believes you went to hell for what you've done. I can't accept that. The Adirondack Mountains were our cathedral. If I ever lost my connection with the divine, it came surging back in waves as we climbed steadily north, steadily higher, together. Cascade Mountain was our favorite hike. The reason for that isn't immediately apparent. Most hikes in the Adirondacks end at summits guarded jealously by dense trees; you can't hardly tell you've arrived anywhere. Not Cascade, however. Do you remember? As we would approach, the ground grew rockier, and the trees and vegetation would thin out, until we were standing on a massive, rocky cap that covered the entire summit. No trees shielded the overwhelming 360 degree view of the Adirondack's High Peaks. I remember on our first climb there, you brought me a jacket to wear. I hadn't realized how cold it would be, lifted on high into the heavens as we were.

Cascade Mountain was our towering cathedral of grandeur, and Chapel Pond was our tiny meditation room, tucked away in a then-forgotten corner of the wilderness. Nature had not made it easy to access: its open side had a steeply pitched slope blanketed by loose leaves and crumbling soil, which ended at a tiny artery of pebbled beach before plunging directly into the swampy green deep. You would effortlessly glide down the hill, not just on your own, but balancing your solid wood canoe over your head as well. I would watch you in awe, stumbling awkwardly in your wake. We would paddle across the pond's smooth surface, the smell of decaying, earthy pond water heavy in our nostrils. I would crane my neck back to stare up and the dominating rock face that soared up hundreds of feet into the sky from the pond's western edge, and that reached countless lengths deep into the water.

Years later, you and I ventured back, this time to Indian Lake. It had been the site of many of our camping trips when I was much younger; the campsites were more suited to young families: cleared out, flatter terrain, and actual working restrooms, a luxury we didn't have for most of our later adventures together. You were looking for a certain campsite as we paddled the huge, winding expanse of the lake, one I hadn't been to with you. You had come there with your brother, and brought along our terrier Mim, who adored

you to no end. She'd never gone camping with us, and was allowed to crash, ferral-dog style, through the dense underbrush on that trip with you. You said you'd never seen her happier. Normally pure white, she emerged from her adventures stained greenish-brown, with blackish muck caked over her belly and legs. In between my legs, I carefully held Mim's urn, containing her ashes, as we looked for the spot where she'd happily run, bounded by nothing, so many years earlier. You called to me as you recognized it, and we canoed slowly towards it. I walked toward the edge of the campsite as you pulled the canoe onto the shore. I waited until I felt you close at my back, and I opened the urn and scattered Mim's dusty remains over the dark brush that lined the campsite. I turned to you; your eyes were already on mine, shimmering white-blue with tears.

The morning after, shortly after your brother called me to tell me what happened, Mom gave me your wedding band. She said she had taken it off a shelf in your workshop a few weeks after you moved out. Fifteen years ago now. I've been wearing the band every day since that day. You might think, why would I wear it? Why have on my hand a symbol of a failed marriage? It's funny; I think how objects take on a life of their own after awhile. This ring is more than a wedding band. If I hold it up to the light, I can see the tiny dents, divots, and scratches scarring the entire surface, all the way around. You always wore this ring. Every day. Mom didn't wear hers. Every weekend that you changed the oil in the cars, shovelled the driveway, worked at your jewelry bench, or manned the grill, it was there. We have the exact same hands, did you know that? Sometimes when I'm wearing this ring, and I look down at my finger, I can imagine for a moment that it's your hand, resting at my side.

Did you know that Mom just tried to kill herself? It's insane; it would be funny if it weren't true. Of course in some selfish way I wonder what this says about me. My Dad killed himself, and my Mom tried to kill herself. And I am the only offspring of the two of you. I can almost hear the sinister soundtrack of doom playing alongside this part of the movie of my life.

"Well, she's gotta be pretty messed up, huh?" I can almost hear the audience members remarking.

When I try to puzzle over why Mom attempted suicide, I circle back to what she would tell me about love. How, when she left you, her reason ultimately was because you didn't show your love for her. I think of the wild flowers you would buy at the farmers' markets on your drives home from work for her. I remember the many days when you would grill outside so she wouldn't have to cook. The mornings when you would bring her coffee, and the two of you would sit in the pair of Adirondack chairs on the front porch, talking for hours. There was love, there was so much love. Yet you were quiet, so very quiet, most of the time. I don't think Mom could take that; I don't think she

could take that you wouldn't direct your attention toward her constantly, or even mostly. Instead you labored in your shop, worked silver at your jewelry bench, or sat in the woods behind our house, by the tiny creek, meditating, on subjects and thoughts I never knew.

And so it was in these months since you claimed your own life, that Mom, plagued by disabilities and illness in the years since your divorce, went to live with her brother, who was hoping to allieviate the burden on me of being her primary caretaker. It was there, that rather than being my primary focus when I was home, she was lost in a busy household: her brother looking for employment, her sister-in-law scurrying between work and home, supporting the family, her nephews, gone most of the time, absorbed in their own lives. It was her brother, frustrated at her lack of motivation to take care of herself, and work at bettering herself, threatening to put her into a nursing home. He left, and she broke down sobbing, and swallowed her entire bottle of oxycodone. My aunt found her shortly after. My uncle told me later she begged my aunt to leave her in her chair to die.

I haven't spoken to Mom much since that day. I find it hard to fully forgive her; I find it hard to understand how, knowing what you did only a few months ago, she could bring herself to it. I find it hard to fully understand how two people so close to me could so definitively decide that life isn't worth anything to them any longer. A few days ago, I likened it to a person discovering that a close relative or friend was a murderer or serial killer. It's an extreme example, but everything about them would seem a certain way on the surface, but so much more was churning underneath. That's how I feel about you, and how I feel about Mom now. It's as if she crossed a line that she can't come back from in my mind.

I wish I hadn't decided when I was a teenager that it "wasn't cool" and stopped calling you Bud. I wish I hadn't let year after year drift by barely seeing you. I wish I hadn't seen you calling, and let it roll into voicemail. I wish I'd listened to your urgings to come visit and learn how to craft silver jewelry like you did. I wish I'd hugged you more. God I wish that most of all, with all of my soul. I wish for one more day, one more crisp, sun-filled day in the Adirondack Mountains with you, in your canoe with you, looking into those electric white-blue eyes of yours, one last time.

I love you Bud. I love you so much. I hope they're right. I hope they're right and we get to see people we love once we die. Because if one thing can ease the wrenching feeling in my gut when I miss you, it's the belief that by some miracle, I might see you, again, someday. §

Sisters

Kristin Schumacher

Martha lay in the bathtub. A film of soap rested on the surface of the tepid water. She examined her wrinkled fingertips and lifted her leg out of the water. Martha looked closely at the spider veins congregating around her knee and spreading over her thigh. She sighed and thought about her sister Denise, who planned to stay with Martha's family for Christmas. Martha felt reasonably certain that her sister did not have spider veins. Denise ran several times a week, and did Day Break Boot Camp before work at the park near her condo in the city. She also didn't have children, and was one of those types of women who kept a separate bank account from her husband and went on long weekend spa vacations or yoga retreats with her sorority sisters. Martha rolled over on her stomach and plunged her head under the water. She screamed, and dozens of bubbles burst out of her mouth. Martha popped her head out of the water and ran her hands over her head, pushing the excess water out of her chin length, curly blond hair.

"Well, it's a good cut for a mom. You don't really have time to do much with it, so you may as well keep it simple," Denise had told her when Martha first bobbed her hair. Martha didn't know what to make of that comment. True, she didn't have much time to style her hair, but even as a mom, she didn't necessarily want to look like one. Motherhood practically denotes dowdiness, and Martha wasn't going for a drab, "I wear pajamas all day" look. She had thought her new haircut looked flirty and fresh, but Denise's comment made her feel self-conscious and matronly. Denise's hair, on the other hand, was meticulously colored, highlighted and styled: sleek, straight, and shiny.

Martha stood up and reached for her threadbare pink bathrobe, which had been a Mother's Day gift from her children years ago. She stepped onto the bathmat and covered herself up with the robe. Martha grabbed a towel, hung her head, and wrapped her hair up in it. She twisted the old door knob, which gave a satisfying snap as it released itself. Cold air rushed around her as she stepped out of the bathroom and crossed the hall to her room. She entered her room and searched for something decent to wear. She couldn't possibly wear her usual sweatpants and public radio pledge drive t-shirt. Martha settled on jeans and a black button down shirt. She even put on earrings and a little makeup. She tried to smile at herself in the mirror, but her eyes belied her upturned mouth. Her children were not home from school yet, and Denise wasn't due to arrive until 7:00, so Martha had a few hours of precious alone time to steel herself for her sister's visit. She clucked her tongue and absentmindedly hung the robe on the hook behind the door. The dog started barking downstairs, so she began to descend the stairs to investigate.

"Scout, what's the matter?" Martha asked.

The terrier stood on the back of the couch, looking out the window and barking an alarm. Denise approached and noticed a massive, black SUV parked in her driveway. "Who is that?" Martha wondered aloud. She didn't recognize the vehicle. The driver slammed the trunk and walked around the side. "Oh, no…it's her. What's she doing here? It's early!" she muttered to herself. Martha fought the urge to dive behind the couch and hide as she had done as a child whenever anyone came to the door.

She heard her sister fumbling with her keys and the lock on the door. Martha didn't remember her sister having a key to her house. She would have to ask her about that later. Frantically, she glanced around the room for a proper place to position herself for when her sister opened the door. She ran across the living room to the kitchen. Martha decided she should look purposeful, so she picked up a dishtowel and pretended to wipe her hands as she heard the door open, and Denise call, "Hey, Sissy, I'm home!" Martha was just crossing back into the living room with her dishtowel in hand, and she said, "Oh, Denise. What a pleasant surprise! I was just straightening up in the kitchen. Megan and I made cookies last night for her class Christmas party."

"It's noon and your hair is still wet," Denise stated. "Don't you have a hair dryer? I can let you use mine, if you want. Better yet, I'll get you one for Christmas."

Martha's hand instinctively shot up to her hair, and she scrunched her curls. "Well, I worked out this morning, and I needed a shower," she lied.

"You're working out? Since when? Do you have a trainer? I can recommend someone if you don't. Anyway, that's great. We can go running together in the morning, if you're up to it."

Martha replied with a vigor she didn't feel, "Sure, sounds great! Let me help you with your bags."

"I took off work early to beat traffic. I hope you don't mind, but I figured you'd be home."

"That's completely fine. I'm glad you're here." Martha leaned forward to hug her sister, but the bags got in the way, and she stumbled forward, making the embrace awkward. She quickly backed off and her face flushed with embarrassment.

Unperturbed, Denise took off her coat and hung it up on the coat rack while Martha grabbed her suitcase and started to lug it up the stairs. Denise followed behind her with her oversized makeup case and another bag Martha assumed was full of presents. "You'll be staying in Kyle's room. He's going to camp out on the floor in Megan's room," Martha huffed.

"Are the sheets clean? I don't want to be exposed to any adolescent boy funk if I can help it," Denise asked as she wrinkled her button nose.

"The sheets are clean. In fact, I bought a new set just for you."

"Thank you, but you didn't have to do that. I

know you and Frank don't have money for luxury items like extra sets of sheets."

"Well, maybe I'll just put them back in the package and wrap them for Christmas. Then, I'll be off the hook." Martha smiled at her sister. She wondered if Denise detected the sarcasm.

"Don't bother yourself with that. I don't need a gift. Being here with the family is enough for me," Denise replied as she tossed her hair over her shoulder.

This seemingly sincere denial of the necessity of gift-giving was out of character for Denise. She expected gifts, and fine ones at that. As early as August, she began dropping hints by making comments such as, "Corbin and I are thinking of redesigning our kitchen. We want to recreate a French bistro – you know, eclectic and bohemian, yet cozy. Anyway, I found these adorable mismatched vintage porcelain place settings…" She would carry on this way, even going so far as to recite web addresses or give catalogue numbers to ensure a successful purchasing experience for the potential giver.

They reached the top of the stairs, and Martha opened the door to Kyle's room. She spent a good portion of the previous day scouring her son's room in anticipation of Denise's visit. Cleanliness didn't appear to be the problem in this case, however. Denise openly expressed her dismay at finding the room covered in pictures torn out of the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit edition and taped all over the walls.

"Really, Martha, how can you and Frank put up with this? If he were my son, I'd never allow it."

"It's not like they're from Playboy, Denise. I have to allow him some freedom and privacy in his own room. At least he's not hiding it from us."

"I'd much rather that he hides his infatuation with girls in bikinis. How tacky!"

"Well, he is fourteen, Denise. I'm sure even Corbin went through a phase like this."

Denise put her makeup case on the dresser and set the bag with the presents on the bed. She turned to Martha and cheerfully piped, "So, what's for lunch? I'm famished!"

Glad to be off the topic of her son's room décor, Martha replied, "How about tuna salad? I have leftovers from the kids' lunches."

"On second thought, how about I buy? We could try that new Mexican restaurant in town. I saw it on the way here. The sign outside said $3 margaritas. I could go for one of those."

"Are you sure? I mean, the tuna salad is already made, and it's free."

"I want a drink and I'm not concerned about paying for lunch, so let's go."

"Okay, just let me get my purse, and we have to be back by 3:15 – that's when the bus drops the kids off."

Martha and Denise readied themselves, locked up the house, and left for the restaurant in

Denise's gigantic SUV. "Bye, Scout! Take care of the house!" Martha called over her shoulder as she shut the door behind them.

The restaurant was warm and smelled of corn tortillas and spices. Colorful serapes and lavishly decorated sombreros were tacked onto the red, yellow, and green walls. Diego Rivera reproductions hung on the wall by the swinging door going into the kitchen. Waiters bustled by with plates stacked up their arms. "I don't know how they do it," Denise whispered with an air of reverence.

Martha and Denise sat at a table by the window. "I want to be able to see the lights on the square," Denise directed the hostess. Denise ordered a pitcher of margaritas with an exclamation of "Let's celebrate the holidays early!" Martha didn't drink much, and she wasn't sure how much Denise drank. She had seen her sister at family events with a glass of wine in her hand, but other than that, drinking margaritas together was something they had never done. About half way through the first glass, Martha stopped drinking as it was beginning to be clear that she would be driving them home. Lifting the salt rimmed glass to her lips, Denise swallowed large gulps of the lime green concoction. Martha tried to hide her surprise at her sister's robust drinking, but Denise must have been able to detect her reaction.

"I need to unwind. Pressure is intense at work since the mass layoffs…for Corbin, too. All the qi gong classes in the world couldn't help me deal with the stress," Denise explained.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Martha said. She hoped she sounded sympathetic, though she couldn't really identify with Denise at all. She had married Frank right out of college, and had Kyle within the first year after marriage. Martha felt as if she was living in another time period. Staying home with children, doing craft projects and tending to her garden. She had no idea what it would be like to go to a job every day. "I'm thinking about going back to work myself. You know, just something part time while the kids are at school."

Denise blew past that last comment. "Being at home all day must be nice. I mean, to not have to deal with all the drama of an office, or with co-workers. Corbin is positively beside himself with all the changes at the firm. He's even started seeing a life coach."

"Life coach?" Martha asked. She began to feel as if she were acting in some poorly done adaptation of the fable Country Mouse, City Mouse. "What the hell is a life coach, and why would someone need one of those?" she thought.

"Well, at first I didn't mind. Corbin was really struggling with his career, you know, feeling like it wasn't going anywhere. He even began to wonder if he'd made a mistake by going into advertising. He started reading all of these books by professional people who quit their jobs to buy farms in upstate New York or backpack through India so they could find their true essence, or whatever. Anyway, the

life coach was supposed to help get his life back on track and motivate him to get ahead. I met her a few times. Her name is Tabitha, she's 25 years old, just out of grad school." She paused in her monologue to finish off her drink and pour herself a refill. Martha could see the end of this story as plain as a billboard on the highway.

Denise continued, "It was fine at first, but then it became, 'Tabitha said this and Tabitha said that and Tabitha recommended this restaurant on the north side – she said the bruschetta is to die for.' I started to feel as if I were married to Tabitha, too. I mentioned it to Corbin, but he said I was being ridiculous. 'Your toxicity is poisoning my well of inspiration' is what he actually said. I caught him talking on the phone to her at all hours. He started covering the mouth piece and walking away if I'd come into the room while he was on the phone with her." Denise sighed and wiped the condensation off her Margarita glass with a well-manicured index finger.

"So, what's going to happen now?" Martha asked her sister.

"I don't know. Corbin said he's going to take this time that I'm visiting you to reevaluate our relationship. He said our marriage is lacking a spiritual component that he now sees as essential to becoming a completely actualized human being."

"Another Tabitha-ism?" Martha inquired.

"Yes."

Denise looked defeated. Martha examined her sister's face. Lines were forming around her mouth, and there were dark circles under her eyes. Martha had never seen her sister so dejected. She seemed lost. This was unusual for Denise whose life only seemed to follow an upward trajectory.

"I don't know, Denise. Do you think he's actually having an affair with her?" Martha asked even though she was reasonably certain he was.

"I think so. He's been spending a lot of time away from home, and he's always whistling and making sure his breath is fresh. He's also been sleeping in the guest room." Denise sounded as though she'd been punched in the stomach.

"Oh, Denise, I'm so sorry."

Denise chose this opportunity to pick up the guest check from the table, and walk to the front of the restaurant to pay. The pitcher of Margaritas was empty. Denise's "enchilada platter" was full of cold, untouched food. Martha stood up, took their coats from the backs of their chairs, and met Denise at the register. She took the keys from Denise's pocket before she handed her the coat.

"Let's go home," Martha said soothingly.

Denise allowed herself to be helped into the passenger seat, and Martha got in on the driver's side. They drove back to Martha's in silence, Denise staring out the window with her hand pressed against her stomach. When they turned on Honeysuckle Lane, Martha noticed a car in their driveway. "Uh, Denise…is that Corbin's car?" she asked.

"Oh my God…Yes, it is! What's he doing here?"

"I guess we'll find out," Martha muttered.

Before Martha even put the vehicle in park, Denise unbuckled her seat belt, and opened the door. She jumped out, rushed to Corbin's car, and pounded on the window.

"What do you want, Corbin!" she shouted. The alcohol had stripped her of her well-honed ability to modulate her emotions.

Corbin started to speak through the window, but thought better of it and opened the car door. Denise stepped back as the door swung open. He approached Denise, took her hands in his, and gazed into her eyes.

"I need to talk to you, Denise. I've made a mistake."

"A mistake. That's funny. You don't make mistakes. Is this Tabitha's doing? Some kind of 'taking ownership' exercise?" Denise bitterly snapped. She wrestled her hands from his.

Corbin looked at Martha and said, "Hi, Martha. So nice to see you! Do you think I could come inside to talk with your sister?"

Martha narrowed her eyes at Corbin and then she looked to her sister for direction. "Denise, is that okay with you?"

"Sure, why not? I'd love to hear all about the mistakes he's made," she mocked.

Corbin and Denise stood behind Martha on the stoop as she unlocked the door. The scraggly little dog jumped up on their legs as they crossed the threshold. The furnace rattled and clanged in response to the blast of cold air that entered the house with them.

"Do you want me to leave the room so you two can talk?" Martha asked.

"No, you can stay. I doubt he has anything worthwhile to say anyway," Denise said.

"Is that okay with you, Martha? I'd prefer to speak with your sister in private." Corbin stated.

"I have some cleaning to do in the kitchen. Let me know if you need anything, Denise."

Martha didn't want to be a part of their discussion. She walked into the kitchen and turned on the radio on the counter. She didn't know what she would do if her husband had an affair. She wasn't sure if she could be in the same room with him ever again. Martha filled the sink with hot, soapy water and began to wash the breakfast dishes. Her kids would be home soon. She overheard parts of her sister and brother-in-law's intense, yet quiet conversation, but she focused her attention on the radio program. Soon, Denise burst into the kitchen, her face glowing with victory. "Guess what, Sissy! Corbin and I are flying to Paris for the holidays! We're leaving tonight!"

"Wow, Denise! That's amazing! But, what about the whole Tabitha thing? This seems so sudden."

"I just have to make the decision to live in the now moment, Martha. As Corbin said, everything happens for a reason, and in the end, Tabitha has

brought us closer together. I can forgive Corbin. We're going to Paris!"

Denise was giddy with excitement. Martha wondered if she would feel differently when the alcohol wore off. Martha followed her out of the kitchen.

"Corbin went upstairs to get my bags. I'm so sorry to miss Christmas with you guys, but I just can't pass up, Paris. You do understand, don't you, Martha?" Denise pouted disingenuously. "Give the kids my love. And Frank, too. Your presents are on the bed."

Corbin came down the stairs, beaming at his wife. He kissed Martha on the cheek and said, "We'll pick up Denise's truck when we get back. Go ahead and drive it all you want. Do you still have the keys? Enjoy your Christmas, and all the best to your family!"

The couple hurried out the door, nuzzling each other. Martha felt sick as she watched Corbin open the passenger door of his BMW for her sister. Denise gave Martha a little wave as Corbin backed down the driveway. Corbin honked the pretentious sounding horn.

When her kids came home, Martha told them the news that their Aunt Denise wouldn't be staying with them for the holidays, and that Kyle could have his room back. "Awesome, Mom," he said, "besides, you always turn into a freak when she's around."

"Yeah, Mom, she's not good for your mental health," Megan chimed.

Later, in bed with her husband, Martha recounted the story. When she got to the part about Tabitha the life coach, Frank asked, "What the hell is a life coach?"

"Exactly," Martha said, smiling to herself in the dark. §

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